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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 43, NO. 2 JULY, 1951

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When outlaws use a railroad squabble as the lever for their depredations, fighting Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield moves in with a brace of angry six-guns!

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AT LEADING STORES COAST-TO-COAST

The FRONTIER POST

by CAPTAIN STARR

Camping—Pleasure or Hardship?

ALONG about now a few million folks are figuring on a camping vacation. For them I'd like to point out that camping out can be either a pleasure or a hardship.

The result depends on two very simple things, which I aim to tell you all about.

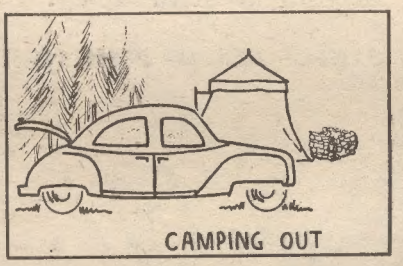
One summer in Yellowstone I kept an eye on a certain campsite where, in the course of a few days, several camping parties came and went. Some set up snug, convenient camps. Others, given exactly the same set of conditions, managed to create obstacles that wore them out and spoiled what otherwise would have been a mighty happy experience.

The sketches you see here give an inkling of what I mean. I made them at the time. The top sketch is a drawing of the camp layout marked "wrong." Compare it with the diagram below it marked "right." What is wrong with the first setup?

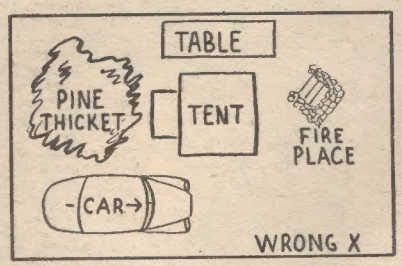
You'll notice, to begin with, that the luggage end of the car is away from the campspot in the "wrong" picture. It's simple to see that such an arrangement doubles the number of steps necessary in making and breaking camp.

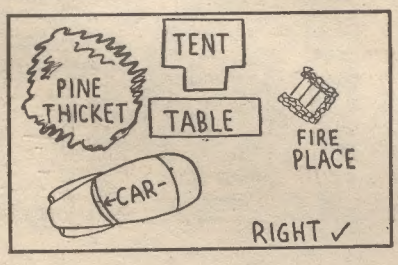
By reversing the car it can be unloaded and loaded at the table, which has been shifted to the center of the camp area in the "right" picture.

In the "wrong" picture, you'll also observe that the tent opening faces a pine thicket. The idea in that, I reckon, was to give privacy. But there are two serious drawbacks. For one, the back of the tent is dangerously close to the fireplace. Also, it is awkward, going from the tent to the fire. And one side of the table is of no use, being away from everything else.



CAMPING OUT





There are two very simple things that can either make or break a camp outing. They are:

1 Your camp outfit.

2 Your outdoor knack.

As to outfit, inexperienced campers invariably bring too much. By loading yourself down you don't increase your comfort. You just tax your strength lugging it, and add confusion.

Outdoor knack consists mainly of common horse sense. The factors of experience, of course, have to be learned. In mosquito regions, you select a breezy campspot, where the pests don't congregate. In windy locations, a sheltered site is the thing. On the windy desert, I've often camped cozily in a dry wash, close under a cutbank. That isn't wise in the mountains, though, where summer rains are apt to flood stream courses. When camping in the woods, beware of tall timber. Don't locate under heavy, high snags. Falling limbs—deadfall—kill or cripple a surprising number of campers and woodsmen. If it's shade you want, look for sound young growth.

Weather is the one ungovernable factor in camping. There are almost bound to be days that are too hot, too cold or rainy. Even in midsummer, America's favorite

camping place, Yellowstone Park, is mugwump country—subject to sudden changes.

Passing summer showers shouldn't dampen anybody's spirits. But a prolonged rainy spell is an ordeal to avoid.

It can be avoided—even though weather is something that nobody can do much about. In most Western country, there are narrow climate bands, often of just a few miles, between disagreeable weather and pretty safe assurance of sunshine. If the weatherman predicts a spell of bad weather where you've camped, pull stakes for a dryer locality. In Yellowstone, when storms lash high-up Old Faithful campgrounds, it's an easy jump across the park to lower, warmer Mammoth campgrounds.

Even in the wettest corner of the United States, in western Washington, there are valleys that are dry and sunny all summer. There's one such place, only a few miles from the gloomy, drippy "Rain Forest" of the Olympic Peninsula, where the average annual rainfall is less that four inches!

So don't squat under a cloud when yonderly there's fair weather. Look at your map, confab with some natives who know local conditions and localities, then duck for a kinder clime.

Of course, camping out comes natural to a windblown wandergabber like me, who has lived outdoors a lot. But most steam-heated, air-conditioned citizens haven't had that opportunity.

I've made sort of a hobby, just watching folks make camp. I've observed 'em from the Canadian wilderness to the desert Southwest, in the interesting process of making themselves either happy of miserable.

"How about people who live in big cities?" somebody may ask. "What chance have they got to go camping?"

Listen, folks. We have 80 national parks in the USA, east and west, and 10 or more in Canada. Some are surprisingly near large centers of population. Besides these there are state parks, forest service camps, thousands of convenient recreational areas and other mountain and shore spots devoted to public use. You don't have to travel thousands of miles to go camping, no matter what part of the country you live in. No car? There are buslines, railroads, "for-hire" autos and trucks and even pack outfits that take campers where they want to go and come back after 'em. If you happen to be up to a hiking trip, you can have a wonderful time at small cost. Some of the loveliest woodlands in America are no farther than 50 miles from New York City. Much closer, in fact, than are similar advantages from such cities as Los Angeles!

So get up and go!

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BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

AN HOUR LATER
DOC PETERS IS COMING AFTER SUPPER. WON'T YOU STAY AND SHARE OUR TROUT?
THANK YOU, YES! BUT WITH THIS BEARD I MUST LOOK LIKE A TRAMP
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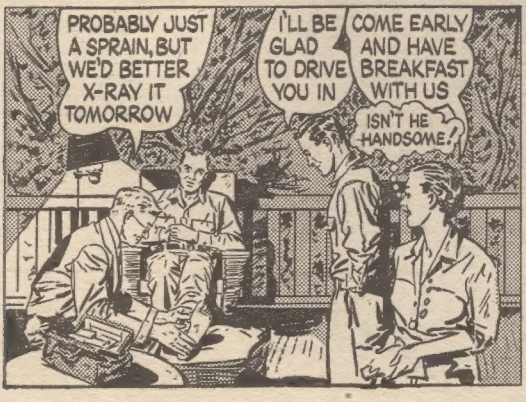
PROBABLY JUST A SPRAIN, BUT WE'D BETTER X-RAY IT TOMORROW
I'LL BE GLAD TO DRIVE YOU IN
COME EARLY AND HAVE BREAKFAST WITH US
ISN'T HE HANDSOME!

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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

RIDERS of the Thunder Trail

A Jim Hatfield Novel

by

JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Rail War

THE old engineer leaned out his window with a friendly grin for the tall, black-haired man in range-

When outlaws use a railroad squabble as the lever for their depredations, a fighting Ranger moves in with angry six-guns!

land garb who had just closed and bolted a stock car door a few lengths back. The cowboy had been making sure that the big golden sorrel horse he had stalled in the car was all right.

"What say, cowboy?" the engineer called. "Like to ride in the cab for a spell?"

Jim Hatfield smiled back at the man in the cab. His long, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green traveled over the big locomotive that was hissing and purring as if with satisfaction while water gushed into its tender tank from the overhead pipe the sooty fireman held in place over the manhole. He glanced back toward the distant caboose of the long freight train and nodded.

"Not a bad notion," he agreed. "Save me from walking, or swinging onto the caboose as she comes by."

"Always better to walk back and take her standin'," cautioned the engineman. "Grabbin' a crummy on the fly is a job for a trained railroader. It ain't the same as a horse, feller."

"Nope, not exactly," Hatfield agreed gravely as he swung up the steps to the engine cab. "You always know where the caboose will be when you reach for it. Can't tell about a horse. He may take a notion to head in another direction."

The engineer glanced suspiciously at Hatfield's sober countenance. He had a feeling he was being joshed by this big broad-shouldered, deep-chested young fellow with the grin quirkings at the corners of his rather wide mouth. But he grinned, and chuckled, as Hatfield's sunny eyes met his.

"Maybe you got somethin' there, son," he conceded. "Well, ridin' a spell in the cab will sort of bust up the monotony. And you can help keep an eye out on the track while that fat tallowpot is shovelin' coal into this hog. Got to keep a close watch now-days, with them blasted M and K rascals out to make trouble."

"Yeah? Up to tricks, eh?"

"Sure are. Why, only day before yesterday they greased the rails on Chisc Hill, back to the east of here, and had rocks and cross-ties piled on the track at the bottom of the hill. Work train slid down them greased rails despite everything the hogger could do to stop her. Banged into that mess on the track and derailed the engine and four cars. Nobody hurt, but just dumb luck they wasn't. That sort of thing's gettin' to be regular of late. And from here to Sanders—that's the town close to as far as the steel's laid—is the real trouble section. We're close to the line they're racin' us to the pass with, and the race's neck-and-neck. They're doin' everything they can to slow us up."

"Having real trouble, then?" Hatfield commented.

"You're darn right," grunted the engineer. He twisted his neck around to glance up at the fireman.

"All right, you lucky work dodger," he called. "You've rested long enough. She's runnin' over already. Hop down here and get busy."

THE fireman swore at him cheerfully, banged the manhole cover shut and came sliding down the coal to the deck. He grinned at Hatfield, opened the furnace door and glanced at his fire.

"All right," he told the hoghead. "Stop gabbin' for a minute and let's go. And try and get up a little speed today. You ain't drivin' a freight wagon any more, like you used to. Wheels was put on this 'gine to turn over. Try and turn 'em a little today. It'll be noon 'fore we get to Sanders, anyhow, and I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," snorted the aggrieved hogger. "I don't see how a feller with only one mouth can eat so much. All right, let's go, and I could use a little steam on this run. I figure I'm the only engineer in the country who can pull a train without steam. Had to learn

how since you been shovelin' coal, or pretendin' to shovel it, for me."

The fireman winked at Hatfield and hopped onto his seat-box. Hatfield lounged comfortably in the gangway, leaning against the rounded corner of the tender, which was pleasantly cool to his back, and gazing ahead along the twin lengths of steel rails shimmering in the

JIM HATFIELD

Texas sunshine. On and on they stretched, until the parallel lines seemed to meet, climbing a heavy grade to the crest of a distant rise. Thick chaparral encroached on the right-of-way with bristles of trees farther back.

The engineer blew three long blasts to call in the flagman. He leaned out the cab window, looking back. Finally he got a highball from the conductor, settled himself comfortably on his seat-box and cracked the throttle, kicking open the cylinder cocks at the same moment.

Steam hissed out on either side. The stack boomed wetly. The great drivers turned over, grinding on the sand that ran in a thin stream from the pipes under the wheels. The driver slipped. The stack thundered, shooting up a cloud of black smoke.

"That's right," growled the fireman. "Tear my fire to pieces. Will you ever learn to start a train without makin' the engine do a square dance?"

The engineer twisted the sand blower valves a little wider. He opened the throttle again. The stack boomed. The drivers ground against the high iron. Back along the train couplers clanked and jangled as the big engine took up the slack. The drivers turned steadily. The stack began its rhythmic song. The long line of cars rolled ahead.

The engineer hooked the reverse lever a little higher on the quadrant, opened the throttle a little more. The train picked up speed. The cars began to rock and sway. The fireman hopped down and bailed coal into the fire-box. He clanged the door shut and hopped back onto the seat-box.

Hatfield glanced at the growth flickering by, then turned his attention to the track ahead.

Louder and louder thundered the stack as the engine breasted the grade. The engineer dropped the reverse lever down the quadrant a few notches, widened the throttle. Soon the speed slowed as the locomotive pounded up the grade with the whole train tugging hard on the drawbar.

The fireman was working almost continually now. Both injectors were wide open, pouring streams of water into the quivering boiler. The steam gauge hand rose slowly and steadily until it touched the two-hundred-pounds pressure point. There it hung, quivering. A feathery squirrel-tail of steam drifted back from the safety valve.

"There ain't a better fireman on the division," the old hogger observed in low tones to Hatfield. "Look the way he's holdin' the steam. Smack up against

Jim Hatfield's bronzed hands flashed down and up and both his big guns spouted flame and smoke

the peg. And we need every pound on this grade. He'll get a chance to rest a bit once we get over the hump. Five miles of downgrade, where I just let 'em roll."

Up and up, with the exhaust booming, the siderods clanking, the crash of steel on steel blending in a vibrating roar. The gleaming ribbons rolled steadily behind. The growth marched steadily forward, flickered beside the cab windows and drifted to the rear. The crest of the rise loomed against the sky and flattened slowly as the laboring locomotive closed the distance.

And on and on stretched the web of ties and rails that the Apaches had called the Thunder Trail.

"Say, cowboy," said the engineer after a while, "climb up the coal gate chains, will you, and see if you can spot that danged head brakeman. He should be over here in the cab by now, helpin' to keep a watch ahead. Don't know what's holdin' him up. Haven't seen him since we stopped for water. In the crummy, poundin' his ear, chances are, the lazy scut. Don't see why the con don't rout him out and send him up here where he belongs."

HATFIELD nodded and clambered up the chains until he could see across the tops of the swaying box-cars.

"Don't see him," he called to the hog-head.

The enginer swore peevishly. "Good for nothin' loafer," he grumbled. "And we need everybody on the job today. We got fifteen carloads of dynamite in this string. Enough to blow Texas clean to Mexico. Well, here we go over the top!"

Hatfield eased partly down off the chains, still standing in the indenture formed by the rounded corners of the tank. The locomotive was just nosing over the brush crowned crest of the rise. On either side the growth was almost close enough to touch.

The engineer was studying Hatfield's broad back.

"Golly, but he's a big feller," he mused. "Way over six feet tall. Nice, too, but I'll bet he's one tough hombre if somethin' stirs him up. The way he wears them two big guns says *business!* Wonder who he is, anyhow? Looks like he packs considerable drag along the line somewhere. The con told me that stock car for his horse we picked up back at Rio was hooked on by order of the general superintendent himself."

The locomotive topped the rise and lurched down the far sag, the throttle wide open, the reverse lever "down in the corner," the exhaust pounding a slow thunder. The cars began humping over the crest, moving at a crawl. Hatfield stepped down from the last chain, still partially shielded by the jutting corner of the tender.

And even as he took his final step, from the growth on either side roared a blaze of gunfire. The fireman toppled from his seat and thudded to the deck, to lie there without sound or motion. The engineer floundered sideward with a scream of pain, fell beside the dead fireman, writhing and moaning, blood widening a dark stain on the front of his shirt. Bullets fanned Hatfield's face. One ripped the sleeve of his shirt.

From the growth poured half a dozen men, yelping with triumph. They rushed for the cab steps of the slowly moving locomotive, guns smoking.

But the man to whom a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers had given the name of the "Lone Wolf" was not one to be shot at with impunity. His bronzed hands flashed down and up. Both his big guns spouted flame and smoke.

Yells of pain and consternation echoed the boom of the reports. Two men went down, thrashing and wallowing in the brush. A third reeled, lurched around and staggered for cover. The remaining three also dived for the brush, shooting as they ran.

Hatfield fired again. Another howl showed he had scored a hit. Then a gun roared from the brush. The Lone Wolf lurched back, sagged against the chains and slid slowly to the deck, where he lay motionless beside the dead fireman and the moaning engineer.

The great locomotive, bereft of a guiding hand, thundered down the grade, gaining speed with every turn of its ponderous drivers. Behind it the long train lurched and swayed as more and more of the length hit the down-grade. The dynamite cars pounded over the crest, their red warning posters glaring in the sunlight.

CHAPTER II

Thundering Death

IT WAS the old engineer's pawing hands and yammering voice that roused Hatfield from the fog of red flashes and clammy blackness that coiled about his brain. Mechanically he raised his bloody face from the deck and glared around with eyes that for the moment only dimly took in details. He shook his head, raised trembling fingers to the slight gash just above his left temple.

"Creased," he muttered. "Must have knocked me cold." He shook his head again, trying to free his mind of cobwebs. The chattering speech of the engineer began to take on definite meaning. "What's the matter, old-timer?" he mumbled.

The engineer's voice rose in a thin wail, urgent, compelling. Hatfield abruptly understood what he was saying.

"You've got to stop her, cowboy!" yammered the voice bubbling over blood-frothed lips. "You've got to stop her! She'll leave the iron on the curve at Sanders. She'll blow the town off the map. Fifteen cars of dynamite!"

"Stop what?" Hatfield wondered dully.

Then suddenly he realized where he was. Realized, too, that the locomotive cab was rocking and jumping like an over-engined steamer in a heavy sea. He scrambled to his hands and knees, weaving and lurching.

"Do what I tell you!" panted the wounded engineer. "Get up there—close the throttle—push it all the way down toward the boilerhead. Then put on the air—the short lever stickin' out there. Not all at once . . . easy . . . easy."

Hatfield's faculties returned with a rush. He bounded to his feet, clutching at the coal gate chains for support. For a moment he stood weaving, then he reeled across the swaying deck and onto the seat-box.

"Do just as I say—" began the engineer again in agonized gasps.

"Quiet!" Hatfield told him as he slammed the throttle shut. "I know what to do! Don't try to talk. You'll choke to death on blood. Try to hold yourself steady. I'm using the air."

Slowly he opened the valve, notching the lever around carefully. He heard the shoes grind against the tires. He eased off a little, then applied the air, harder this time. The grind became a screech. The locomotive bucked like a living thing. Then the long string of loaded cars jammed their million pounds hard against the drawbar. The engine shot forward on screaming wheels.

Hatfield opened the valve wide, taking a chance on derailment. Tensely he watched the needle drop down the gauge as the pressure in the reservoirs fell. The train had not, so far as he could tell, slackened speed in the least. He threw the valve back to port, releasing the brakes. Closed it. The air pressure swiftly built up as the pumps clanked and hammered. Again he threw the lever, all the way around this time, into the "big hole" as a railroader would put it.

The howl of tortured metal rose above the thundering roar of the run-away. It seemed to Hatfield the speed slackened a little. Leaning out the window, he gazed down the long slope. Far below, huddled in its canyon mouth, the buildings looking like doll houses in the distance, was the town of Sanders, the railroad line sweeping around it in a rather sharp curve.

Hatfield shook his head, released the air. Slowly the pressure built up again. Too slowly. Hatfield glanced at the steam gauge. The needle was falling.

Muttering an oath, he slipped to the deck, stepping over the engineer, who had sunk into a stupor. He was forced to move the body of the dead fireman. He flung open the fire door, twirling the blower wide at the same time. The clang of the shovel echoed through the rocking cab. Black smoke boiled from the stack.

Hatfield swung the door shut and climbed back onto the seat-box. He glanced ahead.

Already the town was appreciably nearer. He jerked the whistle wide open and tied down the cord. The eerie wail added to the general uproar.

AGAIN he applied the air. The rocketing train slowed a little more. But not enough. To hit the curve at the present speed would mean disaster. Setting his teeth, Hatfield did what any experienced railroader shrinks from doing under such circumstances—the last resort. He hurled the reverse bar back to the last notch in the quadrant and opened the throttle.

The former uproar was nothing to what now took place. The locomotive leaped and bucked. The great drivers spinning and slipping in reverse, planed curling steel shavings from the rails. The crash of pounding drawbars flung back from

the encroaching growth. Clots of fire streaked through the smoke and steam bellowing from the stack. Hatfield was nearly hurled from the seat-box.

The crowding cars nudged the engine, sending it shrieking along on sliding wheels. The safety valve opened with a roar. The straining boiler groaned and creaked.

Howling, thundering, crashing, the runaway tore down the grade toward the town in the canyon mouth. Hatfield could see men pouring from the shops and other buildings, staring up the grade, then turning to flee the destruction hurtling toward them.

He slammed the throttle shut, hurled the reverse lever forward. The engine shot ahead. Again Hatfield reversed full over. Again the crash of jammed couplers, the howling of the tortured tires.

"That did it!" the Lone Wolf muttered. "She's slowing, and we're still on the iron!"

He dropped the reverse bar into forward motion again and applied every ounce of air. As the pressure screeched through the port and the reservoir hand dropped, the long train slowed to a decent speed. She was under control.

Hatfield exhaled the breath he had unconsciously been holding. He settled back on the seat-box, jockeying the engine brake as the drawbars bumped and grumbled. Again he swept the automatic brake valve lever around the drum. Again the release. Then, as the pressure built up, a steady application.

The engine careened as it struck the curve, rounded it with grinding wheels. Squarely in front of the station the long train came to a stop!

Men were running up from every direction. Hatfield gathered the unconscious engineer in his arms and slid down the cab steps. Instantly he was surrounded by a jostling throng bellowing questions.

"Quiet!" he thundered in a voice that stilled the turmoil. "This feller is bad hurt! Where can I find a doctor?"

A huge man with hard blue eyes and a tight mouth came shouldering through the crowd that opened respectfully upon recognizing him.

"I'm Barrington, the division superintendent," he told Hatfield. "Follow me. We've got a sort of hospital operating over at the edge of the yards. Old Ben Worthington, isn't it? Bring him along, cowboy! You can tell me about it later."

The superintendent was evidently a man of few words. He did not speak again until they reached the makeshift hospital at the edge of the yards. Then his roaring voice got instant attention.

A capable-looking young doctor took charge of the engineer, made a swift examination.

"Think we can pull him through," he said then. "He's old, but he's tough as rawhide. The bullet went through, high up. I don't believe there is any serious internal hemorrhage, and it is not a wind wound, thank heaven. But if he hadn't been got here in a hurry, it would have been different."

"He got here in a hurry, all right," Barrington returned drily. "And now, cowboy, perhaps you can tell me what happened."

Hatfield told him, in terse sentences. As the tale unfolded, the big super's face darkened and his eyes blazed. He shook his fist to the north and swore viciously.

"This is too damn much!" he said. "We've stood for plenty, but cold-blooded murder is too much!"

HATFIELD regarded him a moment, then spoke.

"I've told you what happened, suh," he said. "Maybe you can tell me what this is all about. I was sort of in the middle of it and feel I have a right to know."

"Reckon you have," Barrington instantly conceded. "And I want to thank you for saving old Ben's life, and probably quite a few others. If that dynamite had cut loose, there wouldn't be anything left of this town but a grease spot. What's back of this is bitter railroad competition, that's all. We're racing the

M and K to the pass over to the west. Whoever gets there first—the M and K or the C and P—will control the transcontinental traffic through the Southwest. There are valuable mail and express contracts at stake, among other things. We're ahead, so far, and it looks like we'll win out—if something like what was tried today isn't suddenly successful."

Hatfield stared at the superintendent. "You mean to tell me, suh, that a reputable corporation like the M and K Railroad would back a thing like this?" he asked incredulously.

Barrington shrugged his huge shoulders. "Who else, then?" he countered. "Who else would have anything to gain? And they're not so darn reputable. They are good at short-cuts. They've made us plenty of trouble, but they've never gone this far before."

Hatfield could only shake his head unbelievingly. From being a man of few words, the super suddenly became a man of many.

"You see, son, if we get to the pass first and build through it, they will have to use our tracks from Sierra Blanca on through the pass. Whoever controls the pass holds the whip hand. As I said, controlling the southern route as we do, we hold the advantage for the moment. Old Man Dunn, General Manager of the C and P, saw this thing building up quite a few years ago. He made it his business to get control of this southern route long before the M and K actually contemplated extending their holdings to such an extent as to make them a system reaching the West Coast. When Carvel, the president and controlling stockholder of the M and K, began acquiring his right-of-way, he was almighty surprised to find that Jaggers Dunn had got ahead of him. He reared and charged, but he couldn't do anything about it. At least nothing legitimate. He got busy and acquired the northern route, which runs around the head of Sanders Canyon. And he's been building mighty fast, but hasn't been able to quite catch up with us, although at present he's mighty close. He aims to make the pass first or fail."

"But," Hatfield pointed out, "even if the M and K did lose the race to the pass, they'd still prosper, passing over the fine cattle and farming lands to the north. That is, if the C and P will lease them trackage, through the pass."

"That's right," agreed Barrington, "and they don't have to worry about getting a lease. Dunn is a square shooter from the word go and he never plays a dog-in-the manger rôle. He'll let 'em through. But the southern route controls the cream of the business. And you can count on it, if the M and K gets there first, we'll not use their tracks through the pass. We'll be stuck with a short line with its terminus at Sierra Blanca.

"Also, if that happens, Mr. Dunn's other plans will fall through. He aims to build a line southwest of here to Mexico. That will tap the mining, cattle and other trades from Mexico and the whole Southwest. It will mean such a boom for the section as has never been seen. All the transportation they now have is by way of cart trains and freight wagon lines. That holds the section down. If we can just run our line down there, they'll know real prosperity. But we can't do it without our line to the Pacific. The M and K knows that and they're doing everything they can to hold us up."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. Barrington's argument was plausible, but it also meant such a railroad war as the Southwest had never seen.

THE discussion was interrupted by the entrance of the conductor of the freight train.

"What in blazes happened?" he demanded, panting for breath. "They tell me Hogan is dead and old Ben dyin'? What—"

"Just a minute," Hatfield interrupted. "Conductor, where is your head brakeman?"

"Why," the con replied in surprised tones, "he was on the engine, wasn't he?"

"No," Hatfield replied quietly, "he was not. He said he was going back to look

for hot boxes when we stopped for water. We thought he was in the caboose."

"He wasn't," the conductor repeated.

Hatfield turned to Barrington. "I've a notion, suh," he said, "you'd better send a search party out to look for him, or what's left of him."

"Good God!" exclaimed the super. "You don't think—"

"I do," Hatfield interrupted. "More than likely that was part of the scheme—to get him out of the way so there would be only two men in the engine cab. The brush grows close to the tracks all along there, and he was walking back on the outside of the curve. Couldn't be seen from either the engine or the caboose. Yes, I'm afraid they did for him. That would make it easier for them. They didn't count on me being in the cab, of course."

"I didn't know we were runnin' away till it was too late to do anything," remarked the conductor. "Thought we were rollin' purty fast, and when I caught on that we were plumb out of control I tried to stop the cars with the air from the caboose, but the shoes just wouldn't hold."

"You caused me trouble, while I was trying to build up the air pressure—fiddling with that valve back there," Hatfield observed.

Barrington put a stop to further talk. "Ed," he told the conductor, "go find the sheriff and tell him to get a bunch together and ride out there and see if he can find that brakeman."

"And he may find a body or two around the crest of the rise, if the rest of the bunch didn't come back and pack 'em off," Hatfield added. "Tell him I'd like to ride with him, if he doesn't mind. I'll go get my horse out of that stock car. Afraid he's liable to be bruised black and blue with the shaking up he got on that wild ride."

"Young man, I'd like to have a talk with you when you come back to town," Barrington said. "I want to have time to thank you properly for what you did. Look me up as soon as you get back."

CHAPTER III

To Set a Trap

HATFIELD left the hospital and hurried back to the train. An excited crowd was gathered at the station. People made way for him in respectful silence. When his errand was made clear, men hurried to assist him in getting Goldy from the car.

The big sorrel looked decidedly disgusted but appeared none the worse for his disturbing experience. It was plain, also, that he relished the notion of stretching his legs after the inactivity of the train trip.

Hatfield got the rig on Goldy. Then, while waiting for the sheriff to arrive, he grabbed off a sandwich and a cup of coffee in a nearby restaurant.

He had just returned to the street when a troop of horsemen came riding up. Foremost was a blocky old man with a drooping mustache, a lined, leathery face, and frosty blue eyes. On his sagging vest was pinned a big nickel badge. He took Hatfield in from head to foot with a keen glance and appeared pleased with what he saw.

"I'm Tom Blount," he announced, reining in beside Goldy. "So you're the fellow who stopped the train? Come along. Be glad to have you, and you'll know just where you left those hellions."

Hatfield supplied his name and shook hands with the sheriff.

"We'll have to hit the Comanche Trail over to the east of town and circle around by the north fork to get to the top of that sag," said the sheriff, when the posse got under way. "The Comanche parallels the railroad to the east of the ridge. We've got considerable of a ride ahead of us."

It was but five miles to the crest of the ridge by way of the railroad, but on horseback it was considerably farther. The posse first headed due south to skirt

the hills and the broken ground. Then the direction was changed to the east, following a track that climbed ridges and dipped down sags.

Soon after the posse departed, a lone horseman rode slowly out of Sanders, headed west. Once he was well clear of the town, however, he quickened his horse's pace and sped south by west at racing speed, glancing back over his shoulder from time to time.

Totally unaware of a man who undoubtedly meant trouble on the trail, the sheriff kept up a desultory conversation with Jim Hatfield as they rode on east at a good pace.

"This is the trail the smugglers used, and still use at times," the lawman remarked. "It runs from the lower Big Bend country and joins up with the Comanche which comes straight up from the south, climbs that bunch of hills ahead and turns east. One fork, just south of the ridge we're headin' for, runs due north and crosses the M and K right-of-way."

"And that's where them hellions have headed for, what was left of 'em," remarked a posseman. The sheriff neither denied nor affirmed the man's conclusions.

Another mile of fast riding and the trail dipped into a gloomy, narrow canyon thickly grown with brush. Here it wormed its way along like a discouraged snake between the sloping sides, swerving around chimney rocks and huge boulders, and boring through bristles of thickets.

"That's the Devil's Kitchen over there," remarked the sheriff, gesturing with his thumb toward a cluster of grotesque spires straggling along the course of the trail. "The Apaches bushwhacked a whole troop of emigrants from there once. Did for all of 'em and burned their wagons. See how blacked up some of the rocks are? The Mexicans and not a few Texans say that smoke blackenin' was caused by the devil cookin' a meal of bodies. But it was really caused by the burnin' wagons."

"A plumb natural for a drygulching, all right," Hatfield agreed soberly. "Commands the trail goin' and comin'." He glanced up the sloping canyon wall to the rimrock several hundred feet above. "And from up there anybody comin' along this way could be seen for miles."

The sheriff nodded. "This blamed snake hole always gives me the creeps when I ride through it," he admitted. "Get a funny feeling along my backbone goin' past that hole-up over there. Always glad when I get past it."

THE trail left the shadows of the canyon and reached the rangeland again. Another mile and it joined with the broad Comanche. Soon afterward a fork turned from the main Comanche and slanted up the side of the ridge. Twenty minutes of climbing the ridge and directly ahead, less than a mile distant, were the twin ribbons of the railroad, shimmering in the afternoon sunshine.

As they approached the rails, Hat-

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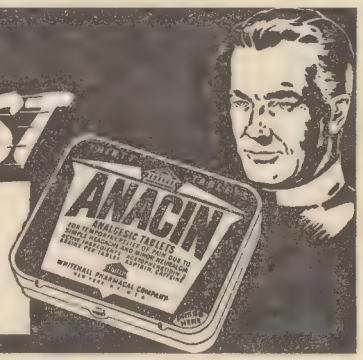

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field's eyes were studying the surface of the trail. The concentration furrow deepened between his black brows, a sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

They were within a hundred yards of the right-of-way when a posseman uttered an exclamation.

"There's where they left their horses!" he said, pointing to where a number of hoof marks scored the soft ground between the trail and the bristle of brush on the east.

Hatfield touched the sheriff's bridle arm. "Pull up a minute," he suggested. "I'd like to have a look at those prints before we mess 'em up."

The sheriff nodded agreement and brought the posse to a halt. Hatfield dismounted and walked slowly forward, scanning the ground as he moved. He paused beside the scoring of hoofs and studied them for some moments. He turned then, and beckoned the posse to come on.

"I saw only six men when they jumped the engine," he said to the sheriff. "But more than a dozen horses were halted here. And here's something interesting." He pointed to the ground. "Keep it in mind, Sheriff. You'll notice that one of the cayuses had a broken calk on a front shoe. Print shows plain."

The sheriff regarded him curiously. "Them eyes of yours don't miss much, do they?" he commented. "Uh-huh, I see it, when you point it out. But I reckon I wouldn't have noticed it otherwise. I can't see that it shows over plain. . . . Well, we might as well leave our broncs here and shove through the brush to the ridge top. That's where it happened, I believe you said."

WITH Hatfield leading the way, the posse forged ahead. After a few minutes they were scanning the ground on the ridge crest and close to the right-of-way.

Evidence of the presence of the raiders was plain enough in the way of trampled ground and broken twigs, but of the killers themselves, dead or alive, there were no signs.

Hatfield did not appear particularly surprised.

"Two men were down when we rolled over," he remarked. "I don't know for sure whether they were done for, but they were hard hit. The rest of the bunch came back and packed 'em off evidently. That was to be suspected, though. Bodies can sometimes be tied up with something or somebody. . . . Yes, they got it hard. Plenty of blood splashed around, you'll notice."

The sheriff swore wrathful agreement. "Nothin' more we can do here, then," he said. "All right, everybody—scatter along on both sides the track and try and find that poor brakeman."

"He should be not far beyond the water tank down at the bottom of the sag," Hatfield remarked. "About a mile from here, I'd say."

They all walked swiftly down the slope to the water tank, then proceeded more slowly.

"Here he is!" suddenly shouted a man who had forged ahead of the others.

Faces dark with anger, the posse gathered around the body of the slain brakeman. His skull had been crushed by a heavy blow and, to make doubly sure, a long knife had been driven between his shoulder blades.

"The snake-blooded devils!" growled the sheriff. "Why couldn't they just have knocked him out?" He turned and shook his fist to the north. "I'd hate to have on my conscience what those hellions up there have on theirs," he declared. "All right, two of you fellers pick him up and bring him along. We'll pack him in on the back of the spare horse we brought. Let's go. There's nothin' more we can do here. Jasper, you and Alfreds take this feller back to town. The rest of us will ride north a ways and see if we can pick up the trail of those sidewinders. I'd sure like to line sights with 'em. I'd do my arrestin' after the shootin' was over. No sense in wastin' rope on horned toads like that!"

HATFIELD said nothing at the moment, but his eyes were coldly gray and deep with thought.

The sun was low in the western sky when they reached the spot where they left the horses. The sheriff swung into saddle. But Hatfield stopped him before he could get under way.

"Sheriff," he said quietly, "that bunch didn't go north. They went south."

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" demanded the old peace officer. "If they didn't go north, back to that cussed railroad camp up there, where would they go?"

"I don't know," Hatfield admitted, "but I do know they didn't turn north when they left here."

"How do you know?" snorted the sheriff.

"Come here," Hatfield told him. "Remember I pointed out to you that iron with a busted calk? Well, here go the prints of that shoe, heading south, and others around it. And look close. Do you see the blood spots? I noticed them quite a ways down the trail as we rode up here. Hop down and take a look for yourself."

Incredulously, the sheriff dismounted. But as he examined the ground closely, his expression changed.

"Cuss it, feller, you're right!" he ejaculated. "They did go south. Now what the blue blazes does this mean?"

"I believe," Hatfield said slowly, "you told me the Comanche Trail heads almost due south from where it forks. South to Mexico. That may be the answer. And if you are right in suspecting the builders of the M and K, I'd say the bunch responsible for the killings was brought in to do the job, and cleared out of the country directly afterward."

"By gosh, that sounds reasonable," replied the sheriff. "Feller, if you're right, we may have a chance to catch 'em. The Rio Grande is almighty high right now and I don't think they'd take a chance on fordin' it at night. They'd make camp somewheres, I'd say, and if they do, we'll have a show at hittin' 'em before they get across in the mornin'. Let's go!"

CHAPTER IV

Drygulched

THE old sheriff rode down the slant of the sag. Hatfield rode beside him, keenly scanning the trail.

"Missed a bet," he told himself. "All that talk about the M and K had me concentratin' on the north and I didn't pay any attention to the trail farther south. If I had, maybe we would have had a chance on runnin' down the sidewinders. Well, reckon a feller can't think of everything."

They reached the fork and rode west along the main Comanche. But where the Comanche turned south at the point of juncture with the track leading to Sanders, Hatfield called a halt. He dismounted and carefully examined the ground.

He turned to the sheriff.

"Wrong guess," he said quietly. "They didn't turn south here. They kept to the track through the canyon, the one that leads to town."

The sheriff swore in disgusted bewilderment. He unforked and made sure Hatfield had made no mistake.

"Now what's the meanin' of *this*?" he demanded to all and sundry. "Are they headed for the Big Bend country? This track runs there, as I told you before, Hatfield."

"There's a chance," the Lone Wolf remarked thoughtfully, "that they circled around to the west and holed up somewheres, figuring to slide into town under cover of darkness, maybe by twos and threes. Reckon there's considerable traffic into Sanders?"

"Plenty," the sheriff admitted. "You may have the right slant. Let's be movin'. Darn! I never had such a day as this has turned out to be!"

Soon they sighted the high bluffs that walled the canyon through which the trail ran. The sun was setting and a level

flood of light poured across the crests of the canyon walls.

Hatfield studied the ragged rimrock as they drew nearer. Suddenly he leaned forward in his saddle, peering intently toward the crest of the southern slope. His keen eyes had caught a quick flash as of shifted metal reflecting the sunlight. Then he saw shadowy movement on the rimrock, movement almost instantly swallowed by the brush that crowned the crest.

"Did you see it?" he asked the sheriff. "There was a jigger sitting a horse up there on the rimrock. He's gone now. Slid down the slope into the canyon, I think."

"I didn't see him," growled the sheriff. "Now what?"

"May have just been somebody ridin' along up there," Hatfield told him, "though what anybody would be doing up there I can't understand. But it might have been somebody posted up there to spot us if we came along."

"But in the name of eternal blazes, why?" demanded the sheriff.

"I can't answer that one," Hatfield said, adding grimly, "but the way things have been happening today, I figure it isn't a good idea to miss any bets. Take it easy through that gulch and keep your eyes open."

Grumbling disgustedly, the sheriff slowed down. The others eyed the gloomy canyon mouth apprehensively. Sunlight still mellowed the heights, but the depths of the gorge were already shadowy with the promise of swiftly coming night.

A mutter ran through the ranks of the posse. Even the sheriff appeared worried.

"Do you actually think the hellions might be in there waitin' for us?" he asked Hatfield.

The Ranger shrugged his broad shoulders. "Funny things been happenin' hereabouts of late, I understand," he reminded. "And I still can't figure what that rider was doin' up on the crest. My advice is to take it for granted, on the face of it, that they're not in there, but at the same time act as though they were. Come on, and take it easy."

Undeniably reluctant, the posse moved into the shadowy mouth of the gorge. The riders' nervousness was communicated to the horses and they stepped gingerly, ears pricked, eyes rolling.

THEY covered a couple of hundred yards, the horses pacing slowly. Ahead, perhaps half as far again, was the cluster of spires and chimney rocks known as the Devil's Kitchen. The gloom was deepening and the shadows gave a disquieting illusion of stealthy movement.

Suddenly Hatfield held up his hand. With one accord the posse jerked to a halt, peering ahead, straining their ears. All was silent save for the raucous clamor of a bluejay somewhere ahead. As they listened, the sound persisted, angry, querulous.

"Something's got that feathered feller worked up," Hatfield said in low tones. "He's sure raisin' the roof. Maybe only a snake nosing around close to his nest, or a coyote under the bush, but he's on the prod against somethin'. Sheriff, is it possible to get around behind that clump of rocks?"

"We ought to be able to circle around through the brush," the sheriff decided, "but it'll be rough goin'."

"It'll be rougher by the trail, if somebody does happen to be holed up behind those rocks, waitin' for us," Hatfield answered grimly. "May be a loco notion, but I'd advise we have a look-see."

The sheriff did not stop to reason why he was obeying the suggestions of this tall, level-eyed cowhand who appeared to have taken charge of things. He merely nodded and threw his leg over his saddle.

"Let one man stay here this side of the bend with the horses," Hatfield said. "Come on, the rest of you, and for Pete's sake be quiet. Use your eyes and ears."

Silently the posse melted into the brush, moving with the greatest care, careful to break no twig, to overturn no stone.

"There's only six of us and, if I figured right, even counting two or three knocked out in the ruckus on the ridge top, there'll still be about ten or twelve of the hellions," Hatfield whispered to the sheriff as they began to veer to the west. "That's not good odds to go up against. But if we can get the jump on them, it'll sort of even the score."

It was nervous work, creeping through the gloom without knowing what they were up against. Ahead loomed the chimney rocks, towering, grotesque in the shadows, seemingly imbued with malevolent life. The brush was thinning and it was still light enough for movement to be detected by a keen-eyed watcher. Flesh crawled at the thought that even now the outlaw band might be lining sights with those hoping to surprise them.

Suddenly every man stiffened to stone. From directly ahead came a quick jangle of metal, such as is made by bridle irons as a horse petulantly tosses its head. For crawling moments, nobody dared to move. Then, at a whispered word from the sheriff, the stealthy advance began again.

"I think I see them," Hatfield whispered. "There to the left—alongside that big rock. Steady, everybody—we've got 'em settin'!"

But just as things appeared to be going nicely, disaster struck. A posseman, a cocked gun in his hand, stepped on a loose stone that rolled beneath his foot. He floundered, tripped over a projecting root. Down went the posseman, and off went the gun with a boom that seemed to fill earth and heaven with a roll of horrific sound.

Instantly yelps of alarm sounded from the shadows beneath the rocks, then a perfect storm-blast of gunfire. Bullets hissed through the air and clipped twigs from the bushes. A posseman howled as one tore through the flesh of his upper arm.

Jim Hatfield raced forward, firing with both hands. A voice rang out above the uproar:

"There he is! Get him!"

SLUGS screeched past the Ranger. One nicked his hand. Another ripped the sleeve of his shirt. A third turned his hat sideways on his head.

But, weaving, ducking, he was an elusive target, and his own blazing guns answered the outlaws shot for shot. A wail of pain split the air. Another, and a torrent of curses. Hatfield sent lead hissing toward the swirling shadows beneath the rock.

The possemen were also firing as fast as they could pull trigger. Back and forth through the gloom spurted the red lances of flame. The screams and stamping of frightened horses added to the uproar. The posse closed in for the kill.

Again the commanding voice rang out, clear above the pandemonium:

"Hightail! Get out of this!"

Followed a tremendous crashing in the brush, a popping of saddle leather, then the beat of fast hoofs racing down the canyon.

"After 'em!" roared Sheriff Blount. "Get to the horses!"

The posse tore back through the brush to where their mounts were supposed to be waiting, only to face fresh trouble. Goldy alone stood quietly in the trail. The man who had been left in charge of the cayuses was raving and cursing and wiping blood from his face.

"What happened?' bawled the sheriff. "Where are our broncs?"

"Gone!" the man shouted back. "Stampeded, the whole bunch of 'em. The dod-blasted shootin' roused up a cussed flock of javelina pigs that were beddin' down somewheres around here. They come bulgin' out of the brush and ran right between the horses' legs. The damn' critters scattered in every direction and hightailed. Knocked me down and an infernal pig kicked me in the nose. I tried to fork that yellow devil horse and go after 'em, but he nigh to chewed my arm off."

The sheriff swore louder than the nose-bleeding horse watcher, and fairly danced with rage.

"Goldy won't let anybody but me

mount him," Hatfield said, as he swung into the saddle. "Cool down. I'll get the horses."

He sped up the canyon, reloading his guns. He found the pig-panicked horses standing quietly enough some distance out on the rangeland. He had no difficulty rounding them up and driving them back to their owners.

"Let's ride," he told the others. "But I'm afraid they've got a good start on us, and it'll be plumb dark in another ten minutes. Anybody bad hurt?"

Nobody was, the man with the bullet-punctured arm having suffered the most serious casualty.

"We threw 'em off-balance," Hatfield remarked as the posse got under way. "They didn't know what they were shooting at. What light there was came from behind us and was in their eyes. I think we nicked a couple, anyhow. Pull up and let's nose around behind those rocks on the chance one didn't get away. We can't catch the others—not tonight."

But a thorough search behind the rocks produced no bodies. Evidently all the owlhoots had made their escape.

Sheriff Blount shook both fists in the air. "Drygulch a peace officer's posse!" he stormed. "What's this country comin' to, anyhow? Those double damned railroads! Everything was peaceful hereabouts till they come along!" He turned to Hatfield. "Mighty lucky for us you were along, son. If you hadn't spotted that lookout up top the slope, hell knows what would have happened."

"They don't waste any time trying to even up a score hereabouts," Hatfield replied. But to himself he added grimly, "The chances were nothing would have happened if I hadn't been along."

There was no doubt in the Lone Wolf's mind but that the drygulching had been primarily aimed at him.

NEXT MONTH'S NOVEL

RUSTLERS RIDE

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD

By JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER V

New Captain?

SANDERS seethed with indignation when the posse rode into town with its pitiful burden.

"There's going to be bad trouble," Superintendent Barrington declared. "West of these hills, the two lines are less than a mile apart. It's going to be difficult to keep the outfits from tangling. But what I'd like to know, is why did that bunch head south instead of north? That sure puzzles me."

It puzzled Hatfield also. It was preposterous to think that the drygulching of the posse had been planned before or immediately after the attack on the train. Hatfield shrewdly—and correctly—deduced that someone in town had kept tabs on all that was going on and had ridden out immediately after the posse departed, to report to the owlhoots assembled in some secret hole-up. But if the bunch really was connected with the M & K, the question repeated itself, why did they ride south?

"I'm going to hunt up a place for my horse and then a bite to eat," he told the sheriff.

"Right down the alley after the first corner from my office you'll find a stable," the sheriff said. "I keep my critters there. The feller who runs it is trustworthy and keeps close watch on the stock. Then you can cut diagonally across the street and you'll come to the Greasy Sack. They serve good chuck there, and the likker is fair to middlin'."

The livery stable proved satisfactory, and after seeing to it that all of Goldy's wants were provided for, Hatfield repaired to the Greasy Sack, a big combination saloon and restaurant. He found a quiet table in a corner, ordered a meal, and surveyed his surroundings with interest.

Although it was still fairly early, the

Greasy Sack was already crowded. Most of the customers were typical railroad builders, rough, boisterous, but seldom quarrelsome. They lined the bar, bucked the games, and clumped muddy boots on the dance floor. Much good-natured chaff was slung back and forth among them, but occasional groups gathered, and from the expressions of faces, Hatfield adjudged that they were discussing the recent outrages.

"Hard men if somethin' gets 'em started," the Ranger mused. "Reckon the M and K bunch are much the same. If the two bunches get together, the fur will fly for fair."

Hatfield was familiar with the intense loyalty such men give to a project to which they are dedicated. They have a great pride in their work, although they would jeer and scoff were such a suggestion voiced, and will work till they drop in its consummation. From stray words he caught, Hatfield decided that the attempt to destroy the town had roused as much anger as the killing of the two railroaders.

Scattered about was a fair sprinkling of cowhands, mostly gay young punchers out for a bust, but with occasional taciturn, hard-bitten old rannies with lined faces and watchful eyes set deep in wrinkles occasioned by much gazing over wide vistas.

Sanders had been, and still was, a wild frontier town. There were great ranches to the east, south and north. There was a thriving traffic in "wet" cows driven across the Rio Grande from Mexico, often by way of the Comanche Crossing deep in the Big Bend. Outlaws roamed the mountains and canyons of the Big Bend country to the southwest and found time to stop off at Sanders for diversion. Sanders provided the diversion and the visitors provided excitement.

With the arrival of the railroad had come more citizens, permanent and otherwise, more saloons and more trouble. The building of the great shops and yards had brought in a swarm of workers and new prosperity to the cowtown. Sanders bade fair to take its place among the more prominent hell towns of the Southwest.

ALL of which made for turbulence and local fracases. But what appeared to be building up in the section was something else again. Bitter railroad rivalry could explode in such war and bloodshed as the country had never known, and there was no telling how far such trouble might spread. Hatfield knew that local ranch and mine owners had contributed heavily to the building of the C and P line to the west, and the projected one south to the Border and beyond. They would not take kindly to having their investment jeopardized.

The Ranger was thinking of these matters as he waited for his food to be prepared. He was also still pondering over the stirring happennigs of the day.

"Wonder if somebody has spotted me?" he mused. "After all, I've been here before, a long time back. Of course what happened there in the canyon may have been just a get-even try because I prevented the train wreck, but that hardly makes sense. Only a bunch of plumb loco jiggers would make a try for a posse for such a reason. No, there's more to it than that."

His food arrived at that moment and he fell to with the appetite of youth and perfect health. While he was eating, the saloon doors swung open to admit a group of new arrivals, a dozen or more in number. They immediately attracted Hatfield's interest.

They were keen-eyed, alert men with a healthy outdoor look. The clothing of some of them was but little different from that worn by the cowhands in the room. Others wore laced boots and slouch hats, instead of high heels and broad-brimmed "J. Bs.," and coats rather than sagging vests over faded blue shirts. Hatfield wondered about them. That they were neither cowboys nor railroad workers, he felt sure.

Dominating the group was a slender, graceful man of perhaps thirty or a little

older. Although his black coat was powdered with gray desert dust, he gave an impression of elegance. His hair was yellow and inclined to curl and in the lamplight showed glints of gold. He had the clear bronze skin of blond coloring much exposed to wind and sun, and his features were delicately formed and regular. His eyes were of so deep a blue as to seem almost black.

There was a hint of cold efficiency in his bearing, which was assured to the point of arrogance. Again Hatfield wondered who and what he was.

His curiosity was assuaged when Superintendent Barrington entered the room, spotted Hatfield and came over to his table. He nodded, dropped into a vacant chair, beckoned a waiter and gave his order. He glanced about, studying the gathering.

"Plenty of business here tonight," he observed. "But there always is. What with the ranches, the mines and the railroad, this town is booming. See Clay Sutton and some of his drivers and guards are here tonight."

"Sutton?" repeated Hatfield with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows.

Barrington nodded. "That's Sutton over there with that bunch at the end of the bar—the tall man with the yellow hair. A nice feller, Sutton. He's cooperated with us. He owns a freighting business. Has trains of wagons operating between here and the Border and over to the Southwest. Handles the stuff that comes across from Mexico. One of his routes runs clear over to Presidio, where our southwest line, if we ever build it, aims to cross the Rio Grande. Presidio is a minor port of entry. Right across the River is the Mexican town of Ojinaga. With railroad facilities, Presidio is due to grow. It'll be the place where the mines and the mountain ranches will get their supplies, and they'll use the railroad for shipping facilities."

"Sounds like a good thing all around," commented the Ranger.

"It is. The valley thereabouts is rich and folks are already beginning to grow cotton and fine canteloupes and lettuce. Once they get the railroad down there, things will pick up. Shipping costs are heavy now and holds the section down, but if we manage to get the east-west line through and then build down there, costs will be reduced to an extent that will make agriculture exceedingly profitable. That's all the country to the south and southwest of here needs—proper transportation facilities. Now they have to rely on freight wagons and Mexican carts."

HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully, and eyed Clay Sutton with increased interest.

Barrington's interest was transferred to his food, but he continued to observe all that went on around him. Suddenly his face darkened.

"Here comes a man who's caused us plenty of trouble," he growled, jerking his thumb toward the door.

Hatfield surveyed the new arrival. He was a giant of a man, as heavily built as Barrington, and nearly as tall as Hatfield himself. He had a square, bad-tempered face, truculent gray eyes and a jutting chin upon which bristled a gray-streaked beard. His nose was large and covered with excrescences. His brows were bushy and his hair, worn rather long, was grizzled. He had enormous hairy hands and thick, corded wrists.

The long barrel of a heavy gun tapped his thigh and a filled cartridge belt showed beneath his swinging black coat. Accompanying him were two hard-bitten old cowhands, lean and lanky, with faces tanned to the color of well-used saddle leather.

"That's Alex Tobin, the owner of the Triangle D Ranch, to the southwest of here, the biggest and best in the section," said Barrington, who appeared to be in another talkative mood tonight. "The feller on his right is Mose Hatch, his range boss, and a killer. Tobin is the most influential man in this end of the state. Our proposed line to the southwest will pass over his holdings and he's

been fighting us tooth and nail."

"He don't seem to have got far," commented Hatfield.

"He opposed Jaggers Dunn, the General Manager, when Dunn was trying for the franchise in the legislature. Dunn beat him, the statute of Eminent Domain was invoked, and we got our right-of-way, but Tobin didn't stop fighting. He's smart enough to realize that the building of the southwest line depends on our getting through to the pass before the M and K does and he is concentrating on slowing us up in every way he can."

"But why should Tobin object to the railroad coming through?" Hatfield asked. "It would just mean more prosperity for him."

"Tobin doesn't need prosperity," Barrington replied. "He's rich. He's an old-time cattle baron with more money than he knows what to do with. He says the railroad will bring in farmers and others. He calls 'em nesters. He's right about that. He doesn't want the prevailing order changed. He doesn't want folks he can't dictate to, as he does to the other ranchers and most of the mine owners. He's a rabidly partisan politician and has for years decided who shall hold office here and who shall represent it over to the capital. I figure he isn't such a bad feller personally, but he loves power and has been used to it for years. He doesn't look favorably on any change of his status, even though it will mean prosperity and advancement for the many."

Hatfield nodded. He was familiar with the type, men who, though they would have vigorously denied such "slander," were, in reality, modern prototypes of the robber barons of medieval times who built their castles at the crossroads and levied tribute from all comers.

"Tobin is a hard man, and that range boss, Mose Hatch, is worse," Barrington resumed as he set down his coffee cup. "Plenty of folks will tell you that Hatch has the fastest gunhand in Texas, though some hold that Clay Sutton could shade him if it came to a show-down. Tobin

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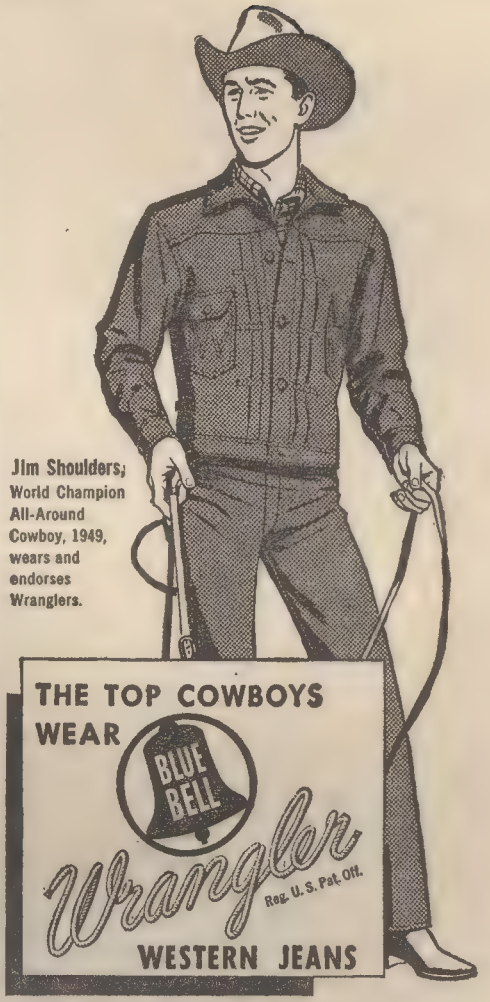
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is an open-handed fighter—his methods are direct—but Hatch is shrewd and subtle, the coyote sort, but with plenty of sand in his craw. He packs a heap of influence with Tobin and I've a notion he even now and then talks him into something that Tobin doesn't really approve of. They're a pair, all right, and we'll have to watch out for 'em. Nothing would suit Tobin better than to see the M and K beat us, and he'll give those horned toads a hand whenever he's able."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully and rolled a cigarette.

BARRINGTON'S brow wrinkled and a worried expression crossed his face.

"I wish Tobin had stayed away from town tonight," he confided. "The boys are mighty worked up over what happened today. And there's Clay Sutton and his drivers and guards to make matters worse. Tobin and Sutton don't get along."

"Any particular reason?"

"Sutton does freight work for the farmers down to the south and that riles Tobin. And Sutton has been freighting for the construction work, too, and naturally that doesn't set well with Tobin, either. They had some words last month. Mose Hatch was along and for a minute I thought he was going to pull on Sutton. Several of Sutton's guards were with him, though, and I reckon Mose decided it wouldn't be good policy just then. Not that guards or anything else would stop Tobin if he got on the prod for fair. Reckon about the only notion Alex Tobin ever had of fear was the sort of murky idea he got from the dictionary definition."

"Reckon Tobin would hardly start anything tonight, with only two of his bunch along," Hatfield observed.

"Maybe not," Barrington agreed. "He'd be plumb loco to buck Sutton and half a dozen of his guards, to say nothing of the drivers, who are plenty salty, too.

"Speaking of guards, that brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about. I've decided to organize a force of guards to keep an eye on the construction work. Figure I'll need 'em particularly bad when we start surveying the southwest line over Tobin's land. Fact is, I've been quietly assembling a force for the past couple of weeks. Mostly cowhands, young fellers. But so far I haven't been able to tie onto anyone to take charge of 'em and hold 'em in line. Just couldn't hit on anybody I figured to have enough savvy and enough personality to handle 'em.

"That is, until today. I've been studying you, Hatfield, ever since you landed here, and I've made up my mind that you are just the man I want. That is if you are figuring to stick around in the section for a spell. We'll pay you considerably more than you can earn punching cows. What you say?"

CHAPTER VI

Deputies in Action

JIM HATFIELD considered, smoking thoughtfully. The offer which Barrington had made him had its attractions. It would give him a good excuse for sticking around and to be close to the railroad construction work.

"Had figured on tying onto a chore of ridin' hereabouts," he finally said. "But I reckon there'd be considerable ridin' connected with what you have to offer."

"There sure would," Barrington interposed vigorously.

Hatfield nodded, and let his level gaze rest on the superintendent's face.

"But," he said quietly, "if I take on the chore, I expect to handle it without interference from anybody. I'll follow your orders on general lines, but when it comes to decisions of action when necessary, I make my own, and carry 'em out."

The big super stared. He was not accustomed to such an attitude on the part of a subordinate. He hesitated, then at last nodded.

"Reckon that's reasonable," he admitted. "After all, you'd hardly have time to come running to me for instructions in a case of emergency. And I've an idea I can depend on you to do the right thing. All right."

"Well, then, suh"—Hatfield smiled—"I reckon you've hired yourself a hand."

They shook on it and Barrington ordered drinks.

"Some of the boys will be dropping in soon," he announced. "Give you a chance to look 'em over."

For some minutes they gave their attention to their drinks in silence. Hatfield, letting his eyes rove, noted that Alex Tobin appeared to be in a bad temper. The rancher scowled into his glass, growled something to Mose Hatch and glanced impatiently toward the door.

"Seems to be waiting for somebody," Hatfield desided. "I've sort of got a hunch something is due to bust loose here tonight. That Sutton jigger is the smiling kind, only the smiles never seem to get up to his eyes. His lips twist, and that's all. A hard man, all right, and don't miss a bet. I've a notion he can hold his own against Sutton and Hatch, though that range boss sure has the look of bein' a tough hombre."

Superintendent Barrington was also watching the door. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Here come Sheriff Blount and the boys," he said.

The old sheriff came striding across to the table, at his heels seven lithe, fresh-faced young cowhands. They were reckless-looking young devils, the sort always ready for a fight or a foot race or a frolic. Hatfield liked their appearance, but decided it would take considerable handling to hold them in line.

"Howdy, Dave," the sheriff greeted Barrington. "Brought your hellions along with me. Just finished swearin' 'em in as special deputies. That'll give 'em standin' in the community and authority to enforce the law wherever it needs enforcin'. Figured it was the best way to handle the business. A private guard wouldn't pack no authority off railroad property. These jiggers can go anywhere, with the whole state of Texas to back 'em up so long as they're in the right."

"Fine!" applauded Barrington. "I thought it was a good idea when you suggested it. And I've just hired Hatfield here to take charge of the outfit."

"You couldn't have done better," approved the sheriff. "Hatfield, hold up your right hand."

Hatfield complied and the sheriff mumbled a few words.

"Now you're all set," he announced, "and if you decide to stick around, I aim to make the appointment permanent. Aim to take it up with the commissioners right away. We can use fellers like you. And it ain't so bad, bein' a law officer. You young fellers are always swallerforkin' around and a little responsibility serves to steady you."

Hatfield smiled agreement, but did not comment.

AFTER a few more words, the sheriff departed. Barrington ordered chairs brought and the guard force sat down around the table.

"He's your boss," Barrington told them, jerking his thumb toward the Lone Wolf. "I believe you'll find out he is just that, sort of soon."

The new specials grinned, looked Hatfield over and agreed with the super. As one later remarked:

"When that big jigger hands you a look out of them green eyes, you know that arguin' would be about as safe as givin' a grizzly bear first holt and tellin' him to do his darnedest."

"I've got a bunkhouse built for you fellers over to the west edge of town," Barrington said. "You'll sleep there and be subject to call at all times. Hatfield will arrange for posting you. We'll ride over the line tomorrow, Hatfield, and you can get the low-down on things."

Barrington went on discussing the situation, and handing out pointers. Suddenly, however, he ceased speaking in the middle of a sentence and stared toward

the swinging doors.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Following the direction of the super's gaze, Hatfield saw men filing into the saloon. They were undoubtedly cowhands and were a salty-looking lot. Hatfield counted an even dozen by the time the last man had shoved his way to the bar.

"It's Tobin's whole darn Triangle D outfit!" sputtered Barrington. He beckoned a nearby waiter. "Pete, go find Sheriff Blount and tell him to hustle over here pronto! Slide out the back door. Tell him to bring his deputies along, if he can find 'em in a hurry."

"Expecting trouble?" Hatfield asked curiously.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Barrington returned. "Begins to look like Tobin is expecting it and acting accordingly."

Hatfield inspected the Triangle D owner. The rancher's face was flushed, his eyes snapping. On Mose Hatch's saturnine face was an expression of malicious satisfaction.

Clay Sutton wore a look of quiet amusement. Hatfield noted that Sutton and his men had closed into a tight group some distance down the long bar from where the Triangle D hands were clustered. Between the two factions was a group of railroad builders who were regarding the cowboys with scant favor. Even as the Ranger gazed, remarks began to be tossed back and forth.

"It's coming," growled Barrington. "Sure as blazes it's coming."

"Begins to look that way," Hatfield replied quietly. He turned to his newly acquired subordinates. "You fellers are law officers," he said. "It's up to us to keep the peace here or anywhere. Pin your badges on your shirts."

He clipped his own badge into place as he spoke. The other occupants of the room were too absorbed with what was building up at the bar to notice the quiet group at the table.

So abruptly that witnesses were never able to agree on just how it started, the row began. A brawny railroader slammed a cowboy against the bar with a swinging blow. Instantly the whole end of the room was a whirling cursing tangle of flying fists and feet. Over went tables. Chairs were smashed to kindling wood. Their occupants, drenched with spilled whiskey and sprawled on the floor, bounced up full of fight and began swinging at all and sundry.

The hanging lamps quivered to whoops and yells, the thud of blows, the clattering of broken bottles. The saloon owner bawled for order, and didn't get it. The bartenders uttered soothing yelps that were not heeded. The lookouts, of which there were two, brandished their shotguns and added their voices to the tumult. Big Alex Tobin was pounding away with both fists and roaring encouragement to his men.

Hatfield noted at once that Clay Sutton and his men were taking no part in the ruckus. They had backed away toward the end of the bar, still holding their close formation, and were intently watching the shindig. On Clay Sutton's handsome face was a look of intense amusement.

Amused also, was saturnine Mose Hatch, who stood over to one side, his thumbs hooked over his double cartridge belts.

HATFIELD leaped to his feet.

"Come on," he told his specials. "We've got to bust this up before somebody loses his head and starts fanging."

In a solid wedge, with Hatfield at the point, the deputies hit the tangle, slamming the combatants apart by the sheer weight of their rush. Hatfield's voice rolled through the room.

"In the name of the law!" he thundered. "Stop it! This has gone far enough!"

The sudden onslaught bewildered the battlers. They gave back before the shouldering deputies, staring at the gleaming badges on their shirt fronts.

"Where in hell did these jiggers come from?" somebody bellowed.

"Stop it, before somebody gets hurt!" Hatfield repeated, his keen eyes shooting glances in every direction.

He noted that the sardonic smile had left Mose Hatch's face and had been replaced by a look of intense concentration. Alex Tobin rushed forward. "Who in thunderation are you, and why are you hornin' into this?" he demanded.

"I'm just tryin' to keep peace and order, as I took an oath to do," Hatfield replied in even tones. "I'd think that a man of your standin' in the community would be glad to help instead of hinder."

The remark seemed to rouse the ranch owner to a fury. His face turned purple, his lips drew back from his teeth. Bellowing an oath, he swung a blow at Hatfield's face.

Before the blow had traveled a foot it was blocked. Hatfield's slender fingers coiled about Tobin's wrist in a grip the man could not loosen, though he twisted and strained and lurched. Mad with rage, Tobin streaked his other hand to his gun butt.

Instantly Hatfield's hand clamped on his wrist. And this time the Lone Wolf was not fooling. Tobin screamed in agony as the terrible grip ground his wrist bones together. Before he could make a move he was spun around and his arm forced up behind his back till he was standing on tiptoes in a frantic endeavor to ease the fearful strain on elbow and shoulder joints. Hatfield spoke again, his voice respectful with the respect due an older man.

"I'm not on the prod against you, suh," he said. "I'm just trying to prevent you from doin' somethin' you'd be sorry for a minute later. Will you behave yourself and act up to your position if I turn you loose?"

Throughout the moment of hectic action, Hatfield had never lost sight of Mose Hatch, standing over to one side. But the range boss made no move to assist his employer. The sardonic smile was back on his leathery face and he seemed to be rather enjoying Tobin's discomfiture.

"Stop it, I tell you!" Hatfield told the struggling Tobin. "You're bucking the law, and even you are not big enough to do that."

A diversion relieved the tension then. From the doorway sounded a wrathful bellow. Sheriff Tom Blount strode into the room, his mustache bristling in his scarlet face.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" he bawled. "Hatfield, turn that old coot loose! If he makes a move I'll bend a gun-barrel over his dumb head!"

CHAPTER VII

Hell's Half Acre

BLOUNT strode up to Tobin as Hatfield released the rancher. The sheriff shook his fist in Tobin's face.

"What's the matter with you, Alex?" he demanded. "Have you gone plumb loco? I'm ashamed of you!"

Tobin stepped back, rubbing his bruised wrist and glowering at Hatfield. Suddenly, however, the fire in his eyes softened to a sly and humorous twinkle, and he grinned, a grin that made his bad-tempered old face appear wonderfully youthful and pleasing.

"Son, you're good," he told the Ranger. "I ain't been manhandled like that since I told my old dad I wouldn't do somethin'. He busted a single-tree over my head and kicked my pants up around my neck till I had to take my belt off to breathe. No hard feelin's, and here's my hand on it."

They shook, smiling into each other's eyes.

Hatfield was still watching Mose Hatch. The range boss was glowering, but his gaze was not directed at either Hatfield or Tobin. He was staring across at Clay Sutton.

But Sutton was eyeing Hatfield, his face serious, his gaze intensely speculating.

The sheriff nodded approval and turned his attention to the battered combatants.

"One more yip out of you fellers," he warned, "and I'll throw the lot of you in

the calaboose and keep you there a week. And you'll find it almighty crowded. I'm not goin' to have riots in my bailiwick, and you can lay to it. Now get busy and straighten up the mess you made in here."

As the subdued battlers began righting chairs and tables, the sheriff beckoned the fat proprietor.

"Make 'em pay for the damage they did, Warty," he said.

But the good-natured saloonkeeper grinned and shook his head.

"Young fellers will be young fellers and paw sod now and then," he said. "I don't mind a few busted chairs so long as nobody got hurt. But if it hadn't been for that big feller there"—he nodded at Hatfield—"it might have been different. Okay, boys!" he shouted to the bartenders. "Drinks for everybody, on the house."

Hatfield and his men returned to their table, the sheriff accompanying them. The drinks were downed. After a few minutes, Alex Tobin gathered his hands together.

"Come on," he told them. "We're goin' home. Got work to do tomorrow."

The cowboys obediently followed their employer from the saloon. Tobin nodded to Hatfield as he passed the table. Last out was Mose Hatch. Hatfield caught the glint of eyes in his direction as the range boss slid through the swinging doors.

The sheriff regarded the Triangle D's departure with a frowning face.

"I can't understand this row tonight," he said. "I figure Tobin and his bunch rode in for some sort of a showdown with somebody, and I can't see it as just a fist-flyin' wring with the railroaders. I've a notion the ruckus wasn't any of his plannin'."

HATFIELD nodded absently. His eyes were thoughtful and the concentration furrow was deep between his black brows.

"There goes Clay Sutton with his hellions," the sheriff announced a little later. "Now maybe we can count on a mite of peace hereabouts." He went on in a ruminative voice, "Alex Tobin's a funny old coot. He's just like a pickle. You never can tell which way he's goin' to squirt. He seemed to take a plumb likin' to you after you roughed him up. He's that way, though. Pat him and he'll pummel you. Pummel him and get the best of him and he's all set to hand out a pat. He's a fightin' man, all right, and I reckon it comes natural to him to admire another fightin' man.

"He's on the prod against Jaggers Dunn, the C and P big boss, but I've a notion he'd take a drink with Dunn any day. Them two old fellers have a good deal in common, for that matter. They both come up the hard way. Dunn was a fireman on his railroad when he was a young feller. Kept climbin' and climbin'. Finally got control of the C and P when it was just a couple of streaks of rust. Built it up to a whoppin' big system and plumb prosperous, and he's still buildin'.

"Tobin started as a forty-dollar-a-month cowhand. Managed to get hold of a little stretch of land and stock it. There are folks that say he got his start runnin' wet cows across the Rio Grande from Mexico. But I reckon that holds good for more'n one big ranch owner. He had to fight for everything he got, and he's plumb ready to keep on fightin' till he drops."

"The sort of men who made this country of ours what it is," Hatfield replied. "The trouble with some of them is that they forget their own hard beginnings and become intolerant of other folks who are trying to get a start. Once they are made to see they are off on the wrong foot, they change mighty fast. I've an idea that Alex Tobin needs to be enlightened in the way Pharoah was enlightened."

Sheriff Blount regarded his table companion curiously.

"You're a funny feller, Hatfield, for a chuck-line-ridin' cowhand," he observed. "Sometimes you talk like one, but at other times you sure don't. Uh-huh, I remember a preacher tellin' about that Pharoah feller. Got himself showered with frogs and fleas and snakes and

what-not, all because he was so uppity and wouldn't play square with a lot of decent folks he'd dropped a loop on. Best as I recollect, he ended up by gettin' himself and all his hands drowned."

"You've got the general notion of the yarn," Hatfield said, and smiled. "But I hope it won't be necessary to drown Tobin." He added thoughtfully, "I don't think it will be."

"I ain't so sure," grunted the sheriff. "I've a notion a good sousin' wouldn't do that ringy old shorthorn any harm, but I'd be in favor of haulin' him out before he went down for the last time. . . . Well, think I'll go to bed. Things look to be settled down for the night. It's gettin' late and them rock busters have to get up early and work tomorrow."

"Think I will, too," Hatfield concurred. "Didn't get much shuteye last night. Any notion where I can tie onto a room?"

"I sleep at the Cattleman's Hotel," said the sheriff. "It ain't a bad hangout. Reckon you can get a room there." He asked Superintendent Barrington, who had sat silent but attentive during the course of the conversation between Hatfield and the peace officer, "You turnin' in, Dave?"

"Think I will," Barrington said. He turned to the guards. "You fellers be at my office in the morning," he told them. "I'll hand out any additional orders I think of, then."

In the company of the sheriff and Barrington, Hatfield repaired to the hotel, where he had no difficulty in getting a room for the night.

"You'll want to sleep in the bunkhouse with your boys, hereafter," Barrington told Hatfield before he said good night. "See you at the office in the morning."

BEFORE going to bed, Hatfield cleaned and oiled his guns. Then for some time he sat at the window of his darkened room, smoking and thinking. It had been a hectic day and the day's events were puzzling in the extreme.

It seemed that a rousing railroad war was aided and abetted by a feud between an influential cowman and the C and P railroad, with said cowman on the prod against a freighting business as an interesting sidelight. All of which builded up for as merry a kettle of blazing hell as Hatfield had encountered in many a day.

"And with some hard men on both sides," he mused, taking a long drag on his cigarette. "Clay Sutton is sure no set-up, even for an old sod-pawer like Alex Tobin. And that range boss of Tobin's, Mose Hatch, has all the earmarks of a *muy malo hombre* if something happens to get him going. Salty and shrewd and don't go off half-cocked. He stood aside during that ruckus tonight and looked sort of bored over the whole business. When Hatch fights he likely fights for keeps.

"Sure got an eye out for Sutton, though, was watching him all the time. Reckon if Sutton had made a move, the results would have been sort of interesting, no matter what Hatch had in mind. Looked to me, too, that Hatch rather enjoyed seeing Tobin taken down a peg. He didn't raise a hand to help Tobin. A cold proposition, all right.

"Well, no matter what else happens, men died today—men with little interest in these rows between railroads and others, innocent men who didn't deserve what they got. It's my business to find out who's responsible. But what I'd like to know for certain is, has somebody hereabouts spotted me? That would sure complicate matters. And I've got a worrying that somebody has."

Hatfield slept soundly and arose early in the morning. He had breakfast in the Greasy Sack, then made his way to Barrington's office.

"I'll get my horse," the super said. "First we'll look over the yards here, then ride along the line to the end of steel."

Shortly the pair were mounted and riding along the edge of the great yard under construction. To the south, dredgers were ripping their way through the mesquite and leveling off the ground

in readiness for the web of rails and switches. Steel was being laid on ground already cleared and prepared. Crossties thudded from loaded gondolas and were dragged into place. The gleaming rails were laid on the ties.

Spike mauls flashed and thudded, securing the steel to the ties. Wrenches in the hands of brawny trackmen bolted fish plates at the joints. A foreman with a gauge made sure the rails were evenly spaced. The track seemed literally to flow along.

Yard engines puffed here and there, shunting cars into position for unloading or drawing away long strings of empties. The clang of steel on steel, the jangling of brake rigging, the clash of couplers and the screeching grind of wheels provided a rumbling undertone to shouted orders and the cheerful chatter of the workers.

CHAPTER VIII

The Slip-up

A NUMBER of the builders appeared to recognize Hatfield from the night before. They grinned and waved their hands. The Lone Wolf nodded back as he surveyed the busy scene with interest and appreciation.

"Goin' to make a difference in this whole country," he remarked to Barrington. "Going to give more folks a chance for homes and a decent livin'. Would be a bad thing for all this to be held up by greed and intolerance and selfish lawlessness. We can't let that happen, suh."

"It's not going to happen if I can prevent it," the big super promised grimly. "Let's ride on west and have a look at the new line."

Shortly after passing the yards they sighted a commodious bunkhouse built near the right-of-way.

"That's your hangout," Barrington said, gesturing to the building with his thumb. "You and your boys will be comfortable there when you're not out on the job."

"Should be," Hatfield replied. "But I reckon we'll only use it to sleep in. I figure this to be a twenty-four-hour-a-day chore, suh. Anyhow, that's how I aim to handle it."

"I'll round up two or three more men for you soon," Barrington said. "Got a feeling you'll need 'em. I'll send 'em to you for approval. You'll have the last say as to who works under you."

Hatfield nodded. He didn't need to be told that.

West of the town they followed the twin ribbons of the track, riding a trail that paralleled the right-of-way, and approaching a barrier of low but rugged hills that cut the western skyline, a continuation of the serried battlements to the north.

"That's our big job right now," remarked Barrington, nodding toward the hills. "We're driving a cut and a tunnel through there. Once we get through we'll go ahead a-whoopin' for a while. But those rocks are holding us up. They'll hold up the M and K, too, though. Their cut and tunnel are about a mile to the north and they've got a longer drive than we have. We're counting on those hills to lend us a hand despite the trouble we're having getting through them."

Another half-hour of riding and Hatfield sighted the soaring arch of a bridge.

"Crosses Lost River," Barrington explained. "We didn't have much trouble there. Good solid approaches on both sides and the river really isn't much more than a creek."

"But a mighty important link, I'd say," Hatfield remarked thoughtfully.

"You're right about that," Barrington agreed. "Took time to build, and everything has to cross by way of it."

"And if anything happened to it, you'd be on a spot," Hatfield remarked.

"You can say that a couple of times," Barrington replied. "But we don't figure anything to happen to it. She's built to stay up. Heavier girders than are really

required—Dunn building for the future again, when bigger locomotives and cars come out. The piers are massive and of selected dressed stone. She's solid."

Hatfield said no more, but his eyes remained thoughtful.

"We'll cross the bridge," Barrington said as they drew near the span. "There's a footwalk wide enough for a horse. The trail veers south here and is crossed by way of a ford that is practical except in high water."

Shortly afterward they left the trail and climbed the embankment. A few minutes more and the horses' irons were clattering on the floor boards of the walk.

Near the center of the bridge, Hatfield suddenly pulled Goldy to a half and sat gazing upstream. Fifty feet beneath, the water foamed over juts of stone to form a considerable rapids.

But Hatfield's gaze was not on the rapids. It rested on a bend of the river less than a hundred yards upstream, a bend flanked by cliffs that overhung the stream. The concentration furrow began to show between his brows, and his eyes narrowed slightly. He turned abruptly to the super.

"Mr. Barrington," he said, "how long have you been in this section?"

"Why, about four months," replied the super. "I was transferred here from the Rio Division to keep an eye on the construction work as it went ahead. Why?"

HATFIELD ignored the question.

"And the engineers who drew the plans for this bridge—where did they come from?" he asked.

"From the Chicago general offices," Barrington replied, looking mystified.

"And did Mr. Dunn look over the site of this bridge?" Hatfield persisted.

"No, I don't think he did," Barrington answered. "He was in Europe at the time. He was over this way when the first survey was run, but not since then. I expect him to show up here most any time."

"Figured he wasn't here when the bridge was built, or it would have been built differently," Hatfield said.

"What in blazes are you getting at, anyhow?" demanded the puzzled superintendent. "What's wrong with the bridge? You think it isn't strong enough? The engineers took into account the vagaries of the current and possible high water when the snow melts in the spring. They allowed a liberal factor of safety. They thought of everything."

"Not quite," Hatfield differed.

"What then?" Barrington demanded in tones of exasperation.

"Cloudbursts," Hatfield said quietly.

"Cloudbursts?"

"Yes, a hell-snorter of a rainstorm that swoops down without warning. Not an ordinary rain like we've had hereabouts of late. The hills to the north are noted for 'em, especially at this time of the year. Let one hit up there and the volume of water in this stream will be quadrupled within an hour. The power of the current will increase in proportion. There'll be such a head of water coming

[*Turn page*]

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down here as will knock that center pier to pieces and take your bridge out as if it was so much straw."

Barrington swore perplexedly and tugged his mustache. He stared at Hatfield, shook his head.

"Do you notice how the current swings to the left at the bend?" Hatfield said. "And then how the solid rock of the cliff that forms the bank throws it back again, decidedly accelerated? Throws it downstream straight at the pier. Notice how even now the water pounds the pier. You can imagine what will happen with the surface of the stream raised many feet and cramped between the cliffs."

Barrington nodded, his face worried now.

"Got a pencil and paper, suh?" Hatfield asked. "I'll show you."

Barrington passed him a notebook. Hatfield proceeded to cover a blank page with figures.

"Here's the equation and its solution, suh," he said at length.

Barrington took the notebook and stared at the intricate calculations with a wrinkled brow. He shook his head.

"I'm no engineer," he admitted frankly. "This doesn't mean much to me."

"But it will mean considerable to your engineer in charge of construction," Hatfield predicted.

"All right," conceded Barrington. "We'll show it to him when we reach the railhead. You seem to know a surprising lot about such matters, for a cowhand, Hatfield."

"I went to school some before I was a cowhand," Hatfield evaded. "Learned a little about it."

He did not consider it necessary, or advisable, at the moment, to inform the super that before joining the Rangers he had had three years in a famous college of engineering, had never lost interest in the subject, and kept up his studies.

"Admitting you're right in your conclusions, what's the answer?" Barrington asked. "We can't afford to have that bridge go out. It would hold us up for weeks."

"A breakwater, diagonaled out from the cliff face there at the bend," Hatfield instantly replied. "It must be built high and strong. It will shunt the force of the current away from the central pier toward the west bank. Then the west pier must be shielded by an additional abutment of stone. The abutment must go deep into the river bed to relieve the danger of underminin' by the water. The diverted current will form a strong eddy close to the west pier that is liable to scour out the sand and earth beneath the pier and let that shift from the perpendicular. With those provisions your bridge will be safe enough, no matter how much water comes down the river. Otherwise, you are courtin' disaster here. It will mean a good deal of work, but it is your only insurance against a catastrophe."

BARRINGTON swore some more.

"We'll take it up with Val Renshaw, the engineer," he repeated.

"What are those buildin's up there on the east bank of the river?" Hatfield asked as they proceeded across the bridge.

"Camp for the workers who are driving the cut," Barrington replied. "We don't bring them to town when they go off the shift. We work both a day and night shift. That way, they have more time for rest and it keeps them out of town. If they were in town every night we'd always be short a few in the morning, getting over a headache. They come to town each pay-day for a bust. We pay every two weeks. That gives them a chance to let off steam."

They rode on and proceeded along the right-of-way. From time to time, trains of loaded cars rumbled by from the east, or strings of empties from the west.

An hour later they reached a scene of tremendous activity where scores of workers were busy widening the cut, laying temporary sidings and driving a bore through the solid rock of the hills. The air quivered to the clatter of steam drills, the thud of sledges, and the scraping of shovels.

Barrington waved to a slight, nervous-looking man who was superintending the work.

"Come over here, Val!" he called.

The little man hurried across the tracks. "How are you, Dave?" he greeted.

"Renshaw," Barrington said, "this is Jim Hatfield, the captain of the new guard force. Hatfield, want you to know Mr. Val Renshaw, the engineer in charge of construction. Tell him what you told me out there on the bridge."

Hatfield repeated his warning. He passed the notebook to Renshaw. The engineer studied the figures with knitted brows. He glanced up at Hatfield.

"And you mean to tell me," he asked incredulously, "that you really believe such a head of water may come down that creek?"

"I don't believe," Hatfield replied. "I know. If you doubt me, have a talk with some old-timers hereabouts and see what they tell you."

"But," protested Renshaw, "that must have been discussed by the field men who ran the lines and drew up the plans for the bridge. It is preposterous to think that they would neglect to gather information relative to the flow of the river. I'm positive that they talked with somebody here."

"Well, if they did," Hatfield replied grimly, "somebody sure handed them a hefty load of misinformation. Do you happen to know with whom they talked?"

"No, I don't," Renshaw admitted, "but doubtless it can be learned from the data in the Chicago office."

"I think it would be a good idea to learn it," Hatfield said.

Renshaw scratched his head in perplexity. "What do you think, Dave?" he asked the superintendent.

"I think," Barrington said slowly, "that we'd better do as Hatfield advises and build that breakwater."

"It will mean a lot of work and pulling off men who are badly needed elsewhere," objected Renshaw. "Mr. Dunn is liable to climb all over us for undertaking such a project on the word of—of a cowboy."

"I'll take the responsibility," Barrington said. "I reckon I can cool down Dunn if necessary."

"I don't think you will have any trouble with Mr. Dunn," Hatfield remarked.

The engineer stared at him. "You don't know Jaggers Dunn," he declared with conviction.

Hatfield smiled slightly, but did not otherwise comment.

"Dave, I've got some things jotted down at the office I'd like to go over with you," said Renshaw.

"All right," the super agreed. "You take a look at things till I finish with Val, Hatfield."

CHAPTER IX

Obtuse Problem

ENGINEER Renshaw faced Superintendent Barrington across the desk, in the office.

"Dave," he said, "who is that fellow, Hatfield, and where did he come from?"

"Blamed if I know," Barrington admitted. "He showed up here yesterday and has been raising hell and shoving a chunk under a corner ever since. He's the feller who saved Sanders from being blown off the map. Reckon you heard about that."

"I did," replied Renshaw. "So he's the man who brought the runaway safely down the grade!"

"Uh-huh," said Barrington. "Also saved Sheriff Blount and his bunch from getting blowed out from under their hats, and hauled Alex Tobin down off his perch last night, and ended up making friends with the old shorthorn."

Renshaw shook his head. "But this calculation," he said, tapping the notebook. "It is an obtuse problem in higher mathematics. You say he worked it out with a pencil there on the bridge?"

"That's right," said Barrington. "Took him about five minutes to do it."

"Well," said Renshaw, "it would have taken me about two hours, with reference books ready to hand. The man's a mathematical genius."

"Don't know about that," said Barrington, "but he's sure a genius when it comes to handling men, or manhandling them, either. I figured he was just the man to take charge of the guard force, and Sheriff Blount agreed with me."

"Confound him!" growled Renshaw. "He's got me worried. I'll ride out to the bridge this afternoon and check his figures. If they appear to be correct, we'll start that breakwater tomorrow."

"If you should ask me," said Barrington, "I'd say it wouldn't be a bad idea to start it this afternoon."

Meanwhile, as they discussed Hatfield, he himself had contacted several members of his guard force, who were station at the railhead. He gave them some explicit instructions. So when he and Barrington started back to town, two of the young cowhands reined up alongside of them.

Barrington glanced questioningly at Hatfield. "What's the big idea?" he asked. "Why you pulling these fellers off here?"

"I'm posting a man at each end of that bridge, day and night," Hatfield told him. "That bridge is the weak link of your chain. Let something happen to it and you are in trouble."

"You mean you think—" Barrington began uneasily.

"If I am able to figure out what I just told you, somebody else may be able to," Hatfield interrupted. "Anyhow I'm taking no chances."

The big superintendent nodded, and offered no further comment.

Hatfield was thoughtful all during the ride back to town. When they reached the bridge, he pulled up in the center of the span and sat studying the approaches for some minutes. To the north the line of overhanging cliffs edged close. On the south was thick and tall growth flanking the right-of-way. Just west of the bridge the track curved around the encroaching cliffs that overhung the track. To the east was a straight-away that extended for nearly half a mile before the track again edged around a bulge of stone.

The two guards took up their posts, one at either end of the bridge. Following Hatfield's instructions they dismounted, tethering their horses in the brush, and made themselves inconspicuous.

Barrington again glanced questioningly at Hatfield.

"In this country," said the Lone Wolf, "a feller learns not to plant himself against the skyline if he thinks trouble might be headed his way."

"And now you've got *me* worried," growled Barrington. "You talk as if somebody might take a shot at those fellers."

"Well," Hatfield replied grimly, "somebody—several somebodies in fact—took a shot at the engineer and fireman on that material train yesterday. It's better to take precautions than lean against the hot end of a passing bullet. The way things have been going hereabouts of late, most anything is liable to happen."

"We'll start work on that breakwater tomorrow," Barrington said firmly. "I told Renshaw that was the thing to do—and I mean it. . . ."

BARRINGTON was as good as his word. The following morning when Hatfield rode over the line, he found men at work on the breakwater at the bend above the bridge.

"But it's a tough job," Renshaw, the engineer, told him when he reached the railhead. "The current is strong there, and we'll have to pump out a lot of sand and silt to get down to bedrock. We had enough trouble with that central pier, but up there it's worse."

Two days later, Barrington brought a couple of new hands to the bunkhouse. One was a plump, jolly-looking cowboy from a nearby spread. The other was a tall, broad-shouldered, and well-set-up man somewhat older. He had pale blue eyes, a tight mouth, and a bronzed face that rarely moved a muscle. Barrington introduced him as Bert King. The little

man was named Bill Purdy.

"Clay Sutton recommended King," Barrington told Hatfield. "Clay said he had been working for a ranch down around Presidio but got tired of the country and quit. He braced Sutton for a job with him, but Sutton has all the men he needs right now and suggested he come up here and see if he couldn't tie onto something. Sutton says he thought maybe we could use him. Looks like a good man to me. But of course it's up to you, Hatfield."

"Chuck-line-riding cowhand, I'd say, from the looks of him," Hatfield said. "Capable-appearing, all right. Don't see any reason for not giving him a try. Chances are he won't stay long—that kind always has itchy feet—but his sort is usually mighty good on a job while signed up. The little jigger looks all right, too."

King and Purdy took up quarters in the bunkhouse and were assigned to the patrol. Purdy soon made friends with everybody, but King, while civil enough, was taciturn, and kept largely to himself. He proved efficient, however, and obeyed orders to the letter.

Several days passed while at the bend above the bridge, pumpers clanked and pounded. Streams of watery sand gushed from the outlet pipes. Masons were busy on the cliff face, hewing out huge blocks of stone that were swung into place by derricks. The stones plunged suddenly into the hurrying water and settled slowly as the sand was pumped from under them.

"We've got the first course into place and anchored solidly," Renshaw told Hatfield. "And work on the abutment to shore up the west pier is proceeding satisfactorily, too. I won't feel easy, however, until the job is completed. Barrington has talked with several old-timers during the past week and every one of them agrees emphatically with what you said. They told him they have seen the water rise as much as ten feet in one hour after a heavy rain in the hills. All of them seemed puzzled about how the field men had gained such an erroneous impression of that river. They say nobody ever spoke to them about it and they can't recall ever hearing the matter discussed. My opinion is it was just a case of plain neglect. When Jaggers Dunn gets to the bottom of this business, the seat of somebody's pants is going to ring like a bell."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. "Something I'd like to have you do, suh," he said. "Try and find out from the Chicago office what the field men filed in their report concerning the river and, if possible, from whom they got their information. I doubt if that would be included in the report, but somebody might recall who they talked to."

"I'll do it," said the engineer. "I'd like to know myself."

IT WAS not until after Hatfield rode off that it occurred to Renshaw to wonder just why the captain of the guards should want such information.

"Can't make that fellow out, for the life of me," he later told Barrington. "He always seems to be looking straight through you and reading what's inside, and you get a funny feeling that if what he sees isn't right, you're going to be sorry."

"You or anybody else is liable to be sorry if he happens to catch you *doing* something he doesn't consider just right," Barrington returned grimly. "I wouldn't want that big jigger on the prod against me. It's remarkable the hold he gets on folks. Why, just yesterday, Alex Tobin was in town. Tobin makes it his business never to speak to me even if we meet face to face on the street. But yesterday, after glaring at me like a puffed-up Gila monster, he growled. 'How's that feller Hatfield? Tell him for me, will you, if he ever takes a notion to quit this dod-blasted railroad and work for decent folks, there's a job plumb open to him at my place.' "

The engineer chuckled. Barrington smiled rather wryly. "He was off like a shot before I had a chance to get in a word," the super concluded. "Fact is, I

was so flabbergasted I couldn't speak for a minute."

Two nights later, Hatfield was sitting by the open window of the guards' bunkhouse smoking, and thinking deeply. The preceding week, in marked contrast to the hectic day of his arrival in the vicinity, had been quiet and peaceful. The tunnel crew was steadily slashing the bore through the granite of the hills. Work on the breakwater was proceeding at a satisfactory rate. There had been no disturbances of any kind. In fact, everything had been so peaceful that Hatfield was uneasy.

A poker game was in progress in one corner of the bunkhouse, where the men off duty were wrangling over their cards. From the town came a low murmur of sound that never ceased. But otherwise the night was still. Overhead the glowing stars seemed to brush the hilltops. The crags stood tall and black against the velvety sky. A faint wind soughed out of the west.

On the wings of the wind suddenly came a sound, a deep and hollow boom. Hatfield started. The poker players looked up questioningly.

"What in hell was that?" one of them wondered. "Sounded like dynamite. But

they ain't doin' any blastin' down this way, and you can't hear it from the tunnel."

Hatfield leaned out the window, listening intently. The sound was not repeated. Only the monotone from the town and the whisper of the wind reached his ears.

"It wasn't far off," he muttered. Abruptly he stood up. "I'm going to take a little ride," he told the guards. "You fellers stick around. Might want you later."

CHAPTER X

Killers Strike

WITH wondering glances following his tall form, Ranger Hatfield strode from the bunkhouse and hurried to the nearby stable. As he got the rig on Goldy, a westbound material train clattered past.

"Maybe I should have flagged that rattler," he grunted, "but somehow I feel better on a horse. They won't make much better time than Goldy will, at that."

He swung into saddle, settled his feet in the stirrups.

"Sift sand, jughead," he told the sorrel. "I've got a mighty strong hunch that some hell-raisin' has been under way over to the west. Trail!"

The golden horse shot forward, his irons drumming the hard surface of the trail. The twin ribbons of steel flowed past. Trees rushed toward them and dwindled away behind. Overhead the stars burned in the Texas sky. Below was a world of shadows dimly outlined in the glint of starlight.

The cliffs rose black and sheer, with the wind whispering softly over their serried battlements. The beat of Goldy's hoofs rang loud in the silence. Hatfield eyed the trail ahead, his brows drawn together. From force of long habit, he rode alert and watchful.

But nothing broke the peace of the quiet night as the flying horse covered mile after mile. Then gradually Hatfield became conscious of a confused murmur ahead. Moments later, he sighted the sullen red lights of the rear markers of the material train. The long string of cars stood motionless. He flashed by the flagman standing far back with his red and white lanterns.

"Thought so," Hatfield muttered. "It's that infernal bridge! Something's happened, all right. The whole camp is roused up."

He had identified the confused murmur as the shouts and excited talk of a large number of men. As he whisked past the hissing locomotive a scene of wild confusion met his gaze. The river bank was black with men who ran about aimlessly, shouting and gesticulating. Flares had been lighted and the forms of the men were outlined in the ruddy glare.

Outlined, too, was the bridge across the river. The whole upper portion of the massive central pier was gone and the lower half was a jumble of cracked and dislodged masonry. The span sagged drunkenly. One of the huge supporting cables had snapped and lay in tangled coils across the girders.

"The damned sidewinders blowed the pier with dynamite!" a half dozen voices shouted as the Ranger unforked.

"So I see," Hatfield replied.

He singled out the conductor of the material train.

"Back up your train to town," he told the con. "If you get there before I do, find Barrington. Tell him I sent you. Tell him to rush every available man here, and at least two more derricks, and plenty of jacks. We've got to raise that span before it drops into the river! Tell him we will need timbers and other materials for two coffer dams. Take it easy on the way and keep red fuses burning on the rear end of the train. You might meet something coming this way, though it's doubtful at this time of night. All right —you've got your powders. Move!"

The conductor moved as the last word was blared at him. He shouted to the engineer, went scrambling up the grab-irons to the top of the head car and started running over the car tops to the rear. The engineer blew three short blasts, threw his engine into reverse and cracked the throttle. With a jangling of couplers and grinding of tires, the material train rumbled back toward Sanders.

Hatfield beckoned a big foreman of the tunnel workers.

"Bill, where are my guards?" he asked. "Bill Purdy and Bert King were on duty here."

"Ain't seen nothin' of 'em," the foreman replied.

"Come on!" Hatfield ordered tersely. "Scatter out and comb the brush around the bridge approach. Nobody could have blown that pier without getting the guards out of the way first."

BUT a search of the ground around the approach was barren of results.

"Chances are they just knifed 'em and pitched their bodies into the crik," hazarded the foreman.

"Could be," Hatfield admitted. He climbed the embankment and stepped out onto the slanting span of the bridge.

"Hey!" warned the foreman. "That's dangerous! The whole shebang is liable to drop into the crik at any minute."

"Reckon it will hold up for a while," Hatfield replied composedly.

"Damn you, if you've got the nerve to cross that thing, so have I!" the foreman bawled in injured tones.

But before he was a dozen yards out on the span, Hatfield had to stop and shout a warning. The whole force was streaming onto the bridge behind him.

"Hold it!" he yelled at them. "You're all right jiggers, but if we all try to cross, the darn thing *is* liable to fall. Half a dozen men will be enough. The rest of you get busy and prepare to raise those coffer dams. Lay track and run that derrick down here from the breakwater. We'll use the stone cut for the breakwater to start the coffers."

With half a dozen chosen from the swarm of volunteers, he eased down the drunkenly sagging span, up its farther slope and out onto the western approach.

Close to the track and only a few yards west of the bridge approach they found Bill Purdy. His head had been crushed by a heavy blow. A long knife was driven between his shoulder-blades.

Hatfield's face was as bleak as the granite of the hills, his eyes coldly gray as he gazed at the dead man. But all he said was:

"Look around for what's left of King."

The searchers scattered out.

"Here's his horse!" a man shouted. "Both of 'em tied here in the brush."

Both horses were saddled and bridled. King's rifle was in the boot. But there was no sign of the taciturn cowhand. After a prolonged search that extended over a wide area without results, Hatfield called the men in.

"Reckon they chucked him into the river," growled the big foreman.

"Could be," Hatfield repeated, gazing at the swirling black water. "By the way, where's Mr. Renshaw?"

"He left on the evenin' work train for Rio," the foreman replied. "Things are goin' along smoothly at the bore and he wanted to check on the tunnel shield they're buildin' over there. We figure to hit earth and loose shale before long and a shield will be needed to protect the tunnel workers. Mighty important, and has to be built just right. He said he'd be gone about three days."

"All right," Hatfield nodded. "I'm taking charge here. Get your men busy on those coffer dams as soon as that stretch of track is laid. We've got to get that span shored up and straightened out before it takes a notion to rain up in the hills. All we need is high water, for the bridge to go out. No time to waste."

The foreman hesitated, staring at Hatfield.

"It's a job for a trained engineer," he said at length. "I can handle the work, after I get the figures, but I can't lay out the plat. It's a ticklish business. One mistake in placin' the coffers and estimatin' the slant and you'll buckle the span. And then she'll go, sure as blazes."

"There won't be any mistakes," Hatfield said quietly. "Mr. Renshaw has an office here, hasn't he? Come on, and I'll work out the plat for you and you can get busy."

Still shaking his head doubtfully, the big foreman led the way to the building where Renshaw had his office. Hatfield sat down at the drawing board and went to work.

"Tell the cook to get boilers of coffee on the stove and to round up a raft of chuck," he ordered over his shoulder. "We'll need it. This is going to be an around-the-clock business."

THE foreman left to relay the order. He was back shortly. He eyed Hatfield's black head bent over the drawing board and a slow grin quirked his lips.

"Folks used to say the Devil was old Jaggers Dunn's sidekick or he wouldn't get all the breaks of luck he does," the foreman chuckled to himself. "Looks to me like the luck is still workin' strong. Caught in a mess like this without an engineer, and that big hellion shows up on the job. Likely he can tell Renshaw off, too, if it comes to a showdown."

But aloud he asked respectfully:

"What next, suh?"

"Keep an eye on the track laying," Hatfield told him. "And see that derrick is fired up. Make provisions for the two more that will be here shortly. And you'd better set the masons to cutting more stone. I don't want to trust timber for the foundations of those coffers. The water pressure works out higher than I thought."

The foreman hurried out, the grin still on his face. His roaring voice was heard bellowing orders.

Half an hour later, Hatfield raised his head from the drawing board and the papers filled with figures. The pound of a heavy locomotive exhaust was quivering the air. It shut off and there followed a screech of brakes. In moments Superintendent Barrington stormed in.

"What the blue blazing hell—" he began.

Hatfield motioned him to a chair. "Sit down, and keep quiet," he said. "I'm busy."

Barrington stared, his jaw sagging. He opened his mouth as though to speak, apparently thought better of it and mechanically dropped into a chair. He dragged out his ripe and began stuffing it with tobacco. For some minutes he smoked furiously, and in silence, while Hatfield continued to figure. Finally the Lone Wolf pushed back his chair and

faced the superintendent, his lips quirking slightly at the corners.

"Hatfield," Barrington demanded, "what in thunderation happened?"

"Reckon your eyes told you as much as mine told me," the Ranger replied, with a shrug. "Somebody blew the top off the center pier. Did a pretty good chore, but slipped up a mite. They should have cut the cables part way through first. One snapped, but the other held and kept the span from going into the river."

"But how did they get away with it?" asked Barrington. "Where were the guards?"

"I would say they were on the job but were outsmarted," Hatfield said. "We've got what was left of Purdy in the bunkhouse. Can't find hide or hair of King, though we did find his horse. The boys figure King was chucked into the river after somebody did for him."

Barrington swore a string of crackling profanity. "They'll stop at nothing!" he roared. "You figure to hold the span with coffers?"

"The only possible way to hold it till the pier is repaired," Hatfield told him. "We'll have to raise the span and straighten it with jacks, and you can't base jacks on green masonry. Besides, I doubt if the span could be raised without buckling with the jacks based in the center. I've got the plat worked out and ready to give to Chuck Thompson, the tunnel foreman. He tells me he can handle the work so long as he knows what to do. Anyhow, I'll be on the job to tell him till Renshaw gets back."

"And you think you can handle it?"

"I can handle it, all right, if nothing happens," Hatfield replied with finality. "Mr. Barrington, do you ever pray?"

"Why—why, yes," stammered the big super. "My mother taught me to, and I've tried to sort of keep up the habit."

"A good habit for any man to keep up," Hatfield said gravely. "Well, what you want to do now, suh, is pray there'll be no rain up in the hills for the next three days." He added with a whimsical smile, "Not that I expect the orderly processes of nature, which are governed by irrefrangible laws, to be disrupted even for the C and P railroad, but it might help. Let's go out and see how things are coming along."

CHAPTER XI

Fight to a Finish

OUTSIDE was a scene of hectic activity. Ties thudded into place. Spike mauls flashed and clanged. From the cliff face came the chatter of drills where the masons were hard at work cutting out stone blocks for the coffer dam foundations, and to replace those blown from the pier. Steam hissed in the boiler of the tall derrick. Everywhere was orderly confusion as expert workmen went about their various tasks.

"Mighty lucky we had those cars of rails and ties on the siding," Hatfield observed. "Getting them from town would have held us up."

"That's right," agreed Barrington. "I cussed that breakwater because of the men and material diverted, but it's proved a blessing in disguise. Otherwise we wouldn't have had anything here."

"And," Hatfield remarked quietly, "if it hadn't been for the breakwater, this wouldn't have happened."

"What do you mean?" demanded Barrington.

"I mean that the hellions responsible resorted to blowing the pier only when they found their cute little scheme of having it go out with the first high water had failed," Hatfield replied. "When they realized we had caught on, they got desperate and tried another slant, without worrying a bit about a couple of murders as a side issue. A snake-blooded outfit, all right."

"Chuck" Thompson, the big foreman, came lumbering over to them.

"Hope it's all right, suh," he said apologetically to Barrington. "I didn't know

what to do and figured I'd better obey Mr. Hatfield's orders."

"Well, if you hadn't obeyed them, I've a pretty fair idea you wouldn't be in much shape right now to tell me about it," Barrington observed drily.

By the light of a flare, Hatfield went over the figures with the foreman, and gave explicit and long-detailed instructions.

"Foundation the coffers to the surface with the stone," he concluded. "Then interlace your timber cribs on top of it. Understand the spacing, do you? That must be followed carefully. There must be an unequal pressure applied to the span, otherwise it's liable to buckle. The lowest point of the sag isn't in the middle, you'll note, and there is a decided list downstream because of the strain on the single remainin' cable.

"Start the repairs on the pier at once. I want the stonework to keep pace with the coffers, so that the span can be anchored to the masonry at the earliest possible moment. If the weather stays dry, things should go along without any trouble, but a hard rain to the north will complicate matters.

"All set? All right. Is that switch in place up there? Then ease the derrick down the temporary track. And we'll get the other two in place as quick as possible. Set a gang of men to buildin' stout rafts and ease 'em out into position. Workin' from the rafts will speed things up. I want the coffers filled with broken stone. They may have to hold the whole weight of the bridge for a time, if the water does happen to rise."

A switch engine had followed the material train from Sanders. It immediately got busy cutting out the derrick cars, easing them along the siding and onto the temporary track to the bridge. The derricks were soon spotted strategically, and huge blocks of stone began to plunge sullenly into the water and be properly spaced by the derrick operators.

Hatfield watched the procedure closely. He was soon satisfied that Thompson knew his business, and could be trusted to handle the project.

The stars were paling from gold to silver and the smell of dawn was in the air when a second material train arrived with more timbers, tools and men. These piled off in the graying light and hurried to the scene of operations.

THE sun was well up before Hatfield found a few minutes to spare. Then, in company of Barrington, he repaired to the bunkhouse to examine the body of the slain guard. For some minutes he studied the dead man, his brows drawing together. Barrington watched him expectantly.

"Find out anything?" the super asked at length.

"Yes," Hatfield said. "A couple of things. First, I'm pretty well convinced that the man who killed that brakeman over on the ridge and the man who killed Purdy were the same."

"How's that?" Barrington asked.

"The same procedure," Hatfield replied. "Both slammed over the head. Both with a knife between the shoulders. In both cases the knife was left in place. And the knives are identical. Both homemade throwing blades, hammered out of a blacksmith's flat file. See the short and heavy handle? The sort of a weapon I've known hellions to pack at the back of the neck. A killer's knife—kept out of sight, and where it is often overlooked when the man packing it is searched. Sort of in the nature of a gambler's sleeve gun."

Barrington shook his head in admiration. "Don't miss much, do you?" he remarked. "What else did you learn?"

"That Purdy was struck down from the front, by a man facing him," Hatfield said. "Notice where the blow landed, just above the left temple and to the front. I'd say he'd turned his head slightly when he was hit."

"And what does that mean?" asked the puzzled super.

"That's what I hope to find out," Hatfield said slowly, and Barrington noticed that his eyes had subtly changed color. They were no longer the sunny green of

a summer sea, but the cold gray of that same sea when storm-tossed under a cloudy sky.

"Come on," Hatfield said abruptly. "Let's take a walk."

He led Barrington across the sagging span to the far bank of the river. A moment of searching and he paused at the spot where the body of Purdy had been discovered.

"Stay back," he warned the super, and began intently studying the ground.

The soil was soft at the spot he examined, and boot prints were plainly discernible. Hatfield finally pointed to the ground and motioned the super to come closer.

"See them?" he asked. "Among the prints left by the workers' hob-nailed soles. The two sets of high-heeled boot tracks? The toes are pointing toward each other. Two men stood here talking—two men wearing cowhand boots. Stood for some time. You can see how the prints shifted slightly. Right here was where Purdy was killed, by a man talking with him, a man I'd say he had no reason to fear. Otherwise the prints left by the killer would have come up behind him and he would have been struck down unawares. He was struck down unawares as it was. Doubtless when he turned his head to look at something the other pointed out. Then the man who struck him made doubly sure by driving that knife into his heart."

"But what the blue blazes?" demanded the bewildered railroad official. "Who would do such a thing, and why?"

"The last question is easy answered," Hatfield replied. "So the killer would have all the time he needed to plant the charge that blew the pier. You can't plant that amount of dynamite right in a hurry. Takes time. The killer made sure he would be able to work uninterrupted. Since the guards were posted here, the night watchman who looks after the camp didn't come down here. I made a slip there. Should have instructed him to patrol the bridge also. Though the chances are if he had, it would have just meant another killin'."

"And you think they did for King, the other guard, the same way, and threw his body in the river?" Barrington asked.

"That remains to be found out," Hatfield replied grimly. "Anyhow, the man who killed Purdy made sure Purdy wouldn't be able to talk. Didn't take a chance on the blow on the head just stunnin' him."

BARRINGTON swore explosively and shook his fist to the north. Hatfield apparently took no notice of the gesture. He was staring southwest toward where the mountains of the lower Big Bend shouldered against the sky.

Suddenly he asked a question: "Recollect the name of the ranch Bert King worked for down around Presidio?"

Barrington knit his brows. "Believe it was the Slash K," he replied. "Yes, I'm sure Clay Sutton mentioned the Slash K when he talked to me about King. A big spread, I believe."

"I've heard of it," nodded Hatfield. "It is a big one, the kind that has a considerable turn-over of hands. Men get tired of that desolate region and drift on to more interestin' sections. Come on—I want to take a look at the ground where they found those two horses tied."

When they reached the spot, easily located by the marks left by the stamping horses, Hatfield went over the ground with the greatest care, following a constantly widening circle with the spot as the center. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

"Here's where another horse was tied!" he told Barrington. "You can see where he stood for a considerable time, and the bark is chafed on that limb beside you. And here are his tracks goin' away from here, headin' south to the trail. The horse used by the killer to make his getaway after settin' the charge, I'd say."

"Makes sense," Barrington admitted. "Looks like one man took care of the chore."

"One expert powder man could handle it without any trouble," Hatfield ex-

plained. "Yes, one man was all they needed. A man with cold nerve and plenty of savvy. But maybe he didn't have quite enough savvy, although he did pretty well put it over on us, in the beginnin' anyway. Maybe he slipped just a mite."

Barrington glanced questioningly at the Ranger, but Hatfield abruptly changed the subject.

"I'm goin' to the bunkhouse and knock off a couple of hours' shut-eye," he announced. "You goin' to stay up for a while?"

"Yes," Barrington said. "I'd already had several hours' sleep when they roused me up last night. I'm good for all day. You go ahead."

"Wake me if anything don't seem just right," Hatfield said. "Chuck Thompson will tell you if he needs me for anything. There's nothin' much I can do till the cribs begin to approach the span. Then I'll have to keep an eye on the settin' of the jacks and raisin' the span. That's the ticklish part."

It seemed to Hatfield that he had hardly closed his eyes when he felt Barrington's touch on his shoulder.

"Hated to wake you—you've only had about three hours—but the sky is graying over and there's a big cloud bank in the north," said the super. "Looks as if the weather might change. Thompson thought you should be notified."

"That's right," Hatfield agreed as he pulled on his clothes. "If it starts to rain up there, we'll be in for plenty of trouble."

He dashed some cold water on his face and accompanied the super to the outside.

The bright blue of the sky had dimmed and the sun, well past the zenith, was barely to be seen through the thickening wrack. Hatafield gazed north toward the hills that shouldered the sky. Their crests were hidden by the mist that underlay the slowly climbing bank of dark cloud. From the hidden crests floated long gray banners that tossed and wavered.

Hatfield eyed the ominous streamers and shook his head.

"Wind up there, plenty of it," he said. "And that's almost sure to mean rain. I'm afraid we're goin' to catch it, and if it turns out to be a bad one, we'll have our hands full to hold that span. Thank heaven the breakwater is already out a way into the creek. It ain't finished, but there's enough of it to help considerably if a big head of water comes down. But it will slow up the coffers. . . . I want to see Thompson."

They located the wet and muddy foreman, whose face was lined with fatigue. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, but were bright with resolution.

"I'm taking over now, Chuck," Hatfield told him. "Give orders to have those coffers filled with broken stone. You don't need to pump out the water. Take too much time. We've got to strengthen 'em against a rise of the river. Then go get yourself something to eat and lie down for a few hours. I'll call you when I want you."

The big foreman started to protest, but Hatfield stilled him with a gesture.

"You'll get to stay up long enough to satisfy you before this chore is finished," he predicted grimly. "Get some rest while you can. You'll need it later."

CHAPTER XII

Man Against Nature

DURING the whole afternoon the workers toiled, sweated, and swore, as they fought to build the coffer dams before the threatening rain should increase the head of water. Overhead the cloud wrack slowly thickened until the whole vast expanse of the heavens was a flattened leaden arch.

The air was heavy and still and gloomed by flickering shadows. The northern hills were now invisible and glimmers of lightning glowed above their

hidden crests. All Nature seemed to be holding its breath in ominous anticipation.

A crowd of spectators from Sanders lined the river bank, watching the battle. Among them was Sheriff Blount, his face grim. He got in touch with Hatfield and Barrington as soon as he arrived on the scene.

"More killin's, eh?" he remarked glumly. "Wonder where it's goin' to end? There seems to be no limit to what somebody is ready to do. I was up to the M and K camp today, sort of lookin' things over. They're drivin' away at their tunnel and I reckon they don't feel too bad over what's happened here.

"But a funny thing happened while I was up there. I met Preston Carvel, the M and K president. You know he's been up there all along, superintendin' the construction work? He sent you a message, Barrington. He said to tell you that if you needed men or materials to help repair the damage down here, just call on him and he'll be only too glad to lend a hand. He said he figures to hand you fellers a prime lickin' before he's through with you, but that he don't need no underhand work and killin' on anybody's part to help him do it."

"The damned fool is makin' fun of us!" snorted Barrington, his face flushing with anger.

But Jim Hatfield said nothing and looked seriously thoughtful.

Another visitor present to watch the battle against the elements was Clay Sutton, the owner of the freighting business.

"If my wagons can do anything to help, Barrington, just let me know and I'll start 'em rollin'," he told the super. "I'd be plumb pleased to lend a hand in downin' those devils. Reckon this thing will make nice hearin' for Alex Tobin. Saw that cussed gunslinger of his, Mose Hatch, in town today, and he was grinnin' all over his face."

A short time after that talk with Sutton, Jim Hatfield sought out Sheriff Blount.

"Want you to do something for me," he told the peace officer. "When you get back to town, amble around a bit and find out if any of the general stores there have sold anybody a hefty order of dynamite lately. It took considerable to blow that pier, and there's none missin' from our powder house."

"I'll do it—sure," grunted Blount, adding with meaning, "but they've got plenty of powder up to the M and K camp."

"Yes, I don't imagine they are short of it up there," Hatfield replied with a significance that was lost on the sheriff.

Slowly the interlaced cribbing rose. Two derricks swung the ponderous timbers into place. Men with wrenches, perched precariously on the lurching rafts or swarming up the sloping side of the coffers, bolted them securely into place. A third derrick dumped stones into the hollow coffers, forcing out the water and replacing it with a solid mass that it was hoped would resist the pressure of the strengthening current.

The workers swore good-naturedly as they were drenched and blinded by flying spray and voiced their opinion of the derrick operator in no uncertain terms. The operator profanely replied to their insults, shouting lurid descriptions of them that included their ancestry for several generations back, their present status in the community and their ultimate destination.

Two switch engines removed empties from the track and replaced them with cars loaded with needed materials. The cook and his helpers plied the workers with sandwiches and steaming coffee. Big Chuck Thompson, the foreman, teetered on the topmost timber of a coffer dam and roared orders and advice.

JIM HATFIELD, standing on the sagging span over the near coffer, gazed at the hurrying river and shook his head. Already the dark water was assuming a yellowish tinge. Uprooted bushes, tree branches and floating logs attested to the downpour over the northern hills.

"She's rising fast," he told Barrington.

"It's goin' to be close. If we don't get the weight of the span on those coffers before the full flood comes down, they'll go out, and the span with 'em. Lucky we got the abutment of the west pier pretty well under way. It's not nearly high enough, but the foundation is based on bed rock and there's no danger of the pier bein' scoured out.

"Somebody slipped in basin' that pier. It rests on bedrock under water, but the outer wall don't go as deep as it should. The field men didn't figure on water ever gettin' that high. Without the abutment as a shield, probably it would be toppled once the water gets to work on it."

Thicker and thicker grew the cloud wrack overhead, the shadows deepening. The flares cast a lurid glow over the scene of hectic activity. Just as full dark closed down, the first slow drops began to fall from the turgid clouds.

"Looks like I didn't pray hard enough," Barrington observed wryly.

Hatfield smiled at the super. "Something to remember, suh," he said, "is that the good Lord gave us two hands but only one mouth, as a token that there is twice the work for the one as for the other. In other words, it's up to us to do all we can ourselves before askin' for help. Bear that in mind, and act accordin', and I believe we'll whip this thing."

Barrington nodded. "Likely you're right," he said. "I wouldn't have believed that so much could have been accomplished in so short a time. Why, they're almost ready for the jacks."

"Another two hours," Hatfield agreed. "Then comes the ticklish part. Barrin' a sudden crest of high water, I think we can do it."

By now the darkness was intense. A fierce wind was howling down the gorge, whipping the water to whitecaps, swaying the span. The broken cable had been spliced and reeved into place, ready to be slowly tightened as the span was raised. The rain was coming down in sheets and through it the forms of the workers were nebulous, shadows, their drenched bodies, bared to the waist, showing weird highlights in the flare of the torches.

Stronger and stronger grew the wind, driving the rain in level spears that stung the flesh. A low, eerie moaning seeped through the thudding of the sledges, the creak of wrenches and the incessant chattering of the derrick engines. It was the vibration of the tortured cables straining to hold the swaying span. Higher and higher rose the yellow water, tossing the rafts, hammering against the rock-filled coffers.

"It's going to be touch-and-go, but I think we'll do it," Hatfield told Barrington, then thundered above the uproar of the warring elements and the turmoil of activity: "That's high enough! Begin swingin' the jacks in place on the far coffer!"

Quickly the ponderous jacks were shoved into place. Another ten minutes and the second coffer had reached the required height. Hatfield surveyed the scene with an intent gaze that missed no details. He glanced up the stream, constantly dreading to see the pale vision that would be the roaring flood engendered by the rain reaching cloudburst proportions in the hills to the north.

The water was dotted with bushes and logs. Occasionally one would strike a coffer with a thud that trembled the massive structure. Once a raft was all but overturned by an uprooted tree that came rolling downstream with thrashing branches. The workers saved themselves by miracles of agility.

GAZING at the wild panorama, Hatfield realized that he was viewing the very epic of the West in miniature. The unceasing warfare of man against the dumb, imponderable forces of Nature. A warfare won against seemingly insupportable odds. His voice rolled forth again:

"All right! Everybody on shore!"

The chattering of the derricks ceased. Hammers no longer swung. The coffers

stood silent and deserted under the buffeting of the wind and the rain. Hatfield looked over the assembled workers.

"Now comes the tough part," he told them. "I don't need to tell you fellers that if anything happens to the coffers while we're raisin' the span, it'll be all over for every man workin' on 'em. So I'm not assignin' anybody to go along with me on that chore. I'm askin' for volunteers."

He threw out his hands in a despairing gesture as the workers crowded forward in a body.

"Oh, what's the use!" he said. "Chuck, you'll just have to pick out the men best fitted for the job." His flashing smile took in the jostling crowd. "The rest of you fellers stay over here on the bank and root for us! You'll be doin' your bit that way, and we can't risk the whole bunch of you on the coffers and span at once. The whole business would be in the river pronto. . . . Let's go, Chuck!"

"I'll take care of the leveling on the span," Barrington volunteered. "I can handle a transit."

"Careful how you take your sights," Hatfield warned. "The crosswires of the telescope must notch perfectly with the figures on the measuring rod all along the span. And check and recheck the transverse levelin'. One side of the span even a bit higher than the other will put an undue strain on one of the cables, and they've got all they can pack as it is."

Crouched on the topmost timber of the last coffer, Hatfield watched the jacks rise as brawny arms twirled the levers. The heads reached the span, formed contact with the steel. Then began the slow, monotonous back-breaking work of leveling the span. From above, Chuck Thompson relayed Barrington's readings with the transit as the man who held the measuring rod moved back and forth on the sagging bridge. With a flare, Hatfield

(Turn page)

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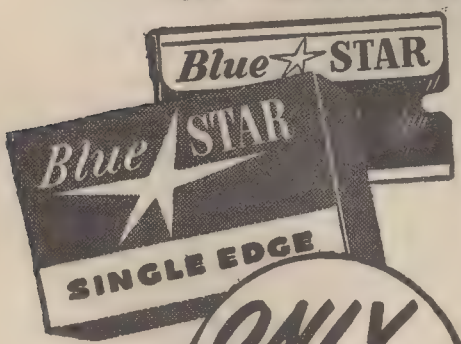

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signaled from time to time to the jack men on the west coffer.

Slowly, slowly the span rose. The jack heads creaked and rasped against the steel as the force of the wind swayed the span. The cables hummed as they were tightened. The girders cracked and groaned. Huge muscles stood out on backs and shoulders as the panting workers tugged and strained at the levers. But it was all Hatfield could do to get them to cease long enough to let relief crews man the jacks.

"We're doing it," Hatfield muttered to himself as the monotonous chant from above reported progress. "Another half hour and I think the coffers will hold against any head of water."

Slowly the minutes crawled by. Now the span was almost level and some of the strain was taken from the cables stretching down from the lofty central tower that stood out blackly in the red blaze of the flares.

"Ten more minutes!" Hatfield prayed, easing his position a little to relieve his aching muscles.

He waved a signal to the west coffer, peered through the rain and the murk to catch the winking answer. And suddenly to his ears came a low and deep-toned mutter that swiftly increased in volume. He listened a moment, leaned over and shouted to Thompson:

"You fellers get off the bridge! Here it comes!"

"You go to hell!" came the roaring reply. "We're stickin'!"

A panting jack man chuckled with grim humor. "Chuck's due for plenty of company on the trip if these things don't hold," he observed, bending his back to work the lever faster.

The jacks clicked spasmodically. The straightening girders shrilled metallic protest. A man utterly exhausted suddenly fell forward on his face and only Hatfield's clutching hand saved him from pitching into the surging water.

Wedging the unconscious form between two timbers, Hatfield seized the unmanned lever. There was no time to get a relief from above. Working the lever with one hand and waving signals with the other, he kept pace with the others.

Any slight tipping of the span at the moment would be fatal!

CHAPTER XIII

The Winner

LOUDER and louder sounded the ominous rumbling from the gorge to the north. Lightning was flashing overhead, thunder booming. A dazzling streak of flames split the heavens and in the bluish glare, Hatfield saw a towering concave wall of water rushing from the gorge mouth.

Even as the black dark following the lightning flash closed down, the flood struck the coffers. They shivered and swayed. The moan of the cables rose to a scream. The jack heads slipped and rasped. But the grim workers never ceased for an instant to bend their backs to the levers.

With a crash, a hurtling tree trunk struck the east coffer only a few feet below the topmost timber. The jack men gripped their levers and clung with fingers and toes to save themselves from being hurled to destruction by the shock. There was a crackling of breaking timbers, a swirl of water that surged over the crest of the coffer. The stones that ballasted it could be heard grinding together. The massive structure seemed to reel and, for a terrible instant, Hatfield was sure it was going over.

But the firmly bolted timbers held. The wall of water roared on, leaving the bridge standing firm against the beating of the wind and the lash of the rain.

Through the turmoil came Chuck Thompson's wailing cry:

"Zero-zero on the rod! Not an inch out of plumb from end to end!"

"Ease off and lock your jacks," Hatfield told his men, and waved a signal to

the west coffer. "All right, fellers, up top! Reckon a gallon or so of hot coffee and half a cow apiece wouldn't go bad."

Amid the cheers from the watchers thronging the river bank, Hatfield led his near exhausted hands across the leveled bridge to food and rest.

Trackmen swarmed onto the bridge to tighten spikes and fish plates and make sure the rails were properly aligned. Within an hour, the first material train rumbled across, headed for the tunnel and the cut.

Hatfield slept until mid-morning, then rode to town. He found Sheriff Blount in his office.

"Took care of that chore for you," said the sheriff. "I learned that four days ago, Mose Hatch bought three boxes of dynamite from Dobbs' general store. Said he wanted it to blow out a water-hole down on the Triangle D south pasture."

Hatfield gazed silently at the peace officer. He had a feeling something else was coming.

"But," Blount added with a shrug of his shoulders, "I made a few inquiries and learned they really did blow out a hole down there."

Hatfield was silent for a moment. "Three boxes, I believe you said," he remarked.

"That's right." Blount nodded. "Three boxes."

Late in the afternoon, Hatfield sought out Superintendent Barrington.

"Things appear to be goin' along smoothly enough at the moment," he said. "I want a few days off. I aim to take a little ride."

"Where to?" the division superintendent asked curiously.

"Don't matter," Hatfield replied. "Tell you about it when I get back."

Barrington grinned. "After what you did with that bridge, I reckon you're entitled to ask for, and get, anything you want from this outfit." He added shrewdly, "Besides, I've an idea you're not riding just for your health."

"You might be wrong about that," the Lone Wolf said, and smiled. "It may be good for my health, and the health of some other folks."

IT WAS well past midnight, and the streets of Sanders were practically deserted, when Hatfield got the rig on Goldy and rode quietly out of town. When he had covered a mile he pulled up in the shadow of a thicket, rolled a cigarette and sat watching the back trail.

"Want to be sure we're not wearin' a trail," he muttered to the sorrel. "If we are and don't catch on, it might mess up things for us, and in a sort of unpleasant way."

For some time he sat smoking, but the trail remained a vacant white ribbon in the light of the newly risen moon. No sound broke the stillness of the night. No shadow moved. Finally he pinched out his cigarette and rode on at a good pace, following the well-traveled trail that wound steadily south by west across the rangeland.

"We're playing a hunch, horse," he told Goldy. "If it turns out to be a straight one, it may help to clear up this mess."

Past the towering Bullis Gap Mountains he rode, through the pass between the Santiagos and the Del Nortes. He skirted the southwesterly tip of the Cienagas and turned almost due west.

Shortly after nightfall of the following day he reached Presidio on the Rio Grande. He stabled his horse and located a place to eat and sleep. For some time he strolled about the river town, engaging waiters and bartenders in conversation and making a few casual inquiries. Then he went to bed and slept soundly. Early the next morning he rode out of Presidio in a northwesterly direction.

Old Drake Knolles, owner of the big Slash K Ranch, and his range boss were sitting on his porch when Hatfield rode up to the ranchhouse.

"Light off and cool your saddle!" Knolles shouted hospitably. "Be chuck on the table in half an hour. Come up and set. I'll have a wrangler take care of your critter."

Hatfield accepted the invitation. "Mr. Knolles, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's right," said the ranch owner. Hatfield supplied his own name and they shook hands.

"Chuck-line ridin'?" asked Knolles.

"Sort of," Hatfield admitted. "Had a little business to attend to down in this neighborhood and figured maybe I'd ought to drop in on you while I was here. Afraid I've got some bad news for you, about a feller who used to work for you. Understand you thought pretty well of him. Seems to have got himself cashed in."

"That so?" Knolles replied with interest. "Must have been somebody who rode for me quite a spell back. My hands don't often quit me. Most of 'em been with me for years. What was the feller's name?"

"King," Hatfield replied. "Bert King."

Knolles knit his brows. "Can't seem to recall the name," he said at length. "What did the feller look like?"

Hatfield supplied a description of the missing cowhand. Knolles shook his head in a decided manner.

"Somebody must have slipped up or you got the spread name wrong," he said. "Don't remember ever havin' anybody like that workin' for me. Who told you the feller had been one of my hands?"

"Feller named Sutton, Clay Sutton," Hatfield replied. "Understand he gets down this way every now and then. He said you told him you thought mighty well of King."

A scowl darkened Knolles' face. "Now I know blame well you got a wrong slant," he growled. "I know the feller you're talkin' about, but I don't hold no truck with that horned toad."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked. "Folks up around Sanders seem to think pretty well of Sutton."

"Well, we don't think so well of him down here," replied Knolles. "He owns a legitimate freightin' business and makes plenty of *dinero* at it, but he ain't satisfied with honest money. Does considerable smugglin' on the side. Runs guns across the river to trouble-makers below the Line, and handles other stuff that ain't legitimate. Like marihuana and such.

"The customs folks have had an eye on him for some time, but they ain't never been able to drop a loop on him. Knowin' a feller does somethin' and catchin' him at it are different matters. Sutton is smart, and plumb salty. Deadly with a gun, or so I've been told. If he stands up for the feller you asked me about, I'm glad that cowhand never rode for me. Critters of the same brand have a habit of herdin' together."

AFTER Hatfield had enjoyed a good meal and had ridden off, Knolles turned to his range boss.

"Hank," he remarked contemplatively, "I wouldn't want to be in that King jigger's shoes."

"Who the heck would want to be in a dead man's shoes?" snorted the range boss.

"Got a hunch he ain't dead," said Knolles. "Chances are he'd be better off if he was and had it over with. Feller didn't say he was dead. Just said he *seemed* to have got himself cashed in. That big feller's on his trail, Hank, and I sure wouldn't want him on my trail. No siree!"

Jim Hatfield wore a satisfied expression as he rode north.

"It was a straight hunch, horse," he told Goldy. "Now I've got a prime notion who is the big he-wolf of the pack. But how to drop a loop on him, and his snake-blooded pard is somethin' else again. Can't figure that one out just yet, but maybe we'll get a break."

When Hatfield got back to Sanders, two days later, Barrington had surprising news for him.

"Old Jaggers Dunn is sure a gambler," chuckled the super. "We're still racin' the M and K, neck-and-neck, and he's sent orders to start the line south at once. The field men got in this morning and are all set to begin running their lines tomorrow."

"Over Alex Tobin's holdin's," Hatfield remarked thoughtfully. "Reckon I'd better trail along with them till they're beyond Tobin's range."

"A first rate idea," agreed the super. "And take some of your boys along. I added a few more to the force while you were away. I don't think Tobin will start anything, but if the old shorthorn flies off the handle, there's no telling what he's liable to do. Better be prepared for anything."

The following morning the field men began surveying the new line. A chuck-wagon accompanied them. Hatfield and four of his guards paced their horses on either side. The transit men took their sights and plotted the contours, estimating grades and figuring curves. The chain men chanted their monotonous "Stick—stick!" as they dragged their hundred-foot tape along and checked off the distance from point to point. Early afternoon found them running the line across the Triangle D holdings.

"Here come some fellers," one of the guards suddenly remarked. "Comin' fast."

"Some of the Triangle D boys, probably," another said, drawing his Winchester from the boot and resting it across the saddle in front of him.

"Take it easy," Hatfield warned. "They may just be ridin' down to look things over. It's their move . . . Uh-huh, it's the Triangle D bunch, all right. There's Mose Hatch!"

CHAPTER XIV

Not Good Enough

QUICKLY the half-dozen approaching riders closed the distance. They pulled up close to the surveying party and eyed the operations in silence for a few moments. Then Mose Hatch dismounted and walked forward.

Hatfield leisurely swung his leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. Hatch paused, eyeing the Lone Wolf, his mouth a tight, bloodless line across his swarthy face.

"Reckon you fellers know you're on private holdin's," he remarked, his voice flat and toneless.

"Reckon that's so," Hatfield agreed. "This strip is owned by the C and P railroad, by right of Eminent Domain."

Hatch's face darkened. "By right of plain stealin', you mean," he corrected.

Hatfield didn't waste any more time. "Hatch," he said, "I know you rode over here to make trouble. Well, if it's trouble you're looking for, we'll hand it to you till it runs out of your ears."

The range boss' eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't talk so big if you wasn't hidin' behind that tin dishpan you're wearin'." he sneered.

Hatfield's hand raised to his chest. He flipped the deputy sheriff's badge loose and tossed it to the ground.

"Not hidin' behind anything now," he said quietly. "Your bluff's called, Hatch. Fill your hand, or get goin'."

Mose Hatch's jaw sagged slightly. He evidently hadn't expected such a prompt reaction. But he was shrewd enough to realize that Hatfield's move had given him ground for later claiming justification for whatever he did. He had received the unequivocal challenge of the West. He could meet the challenge in the West's accepted manner, or he could back down. His mouth snapped shut.

"You asked for it!" he rasped.

His right hand moved with blinding speed. Then he reeled back with a yell of agony, clutching at his blood-spouting arm. His gun, unfired, lay on the ground at his feet.

Hatfield flickered a glance at the Triangle D punchers. They were sitting rigid under the threat of the guards' leveled rifles. He holstered his smoke-wisping gun and spoke to Hatch, his voice like the grind of steel on ice.

"Don't try to reach for the other one," he warned. "I'll kill you if you do. I let you off easy this time. Now go back to

the man who sent you here and tell him you wasn't good enough. And tell him for me he ain't good enough either."

"You'll find out, damn you!" panted Hatch, his face twisted with rage and pain. "You'll find out! You don't know what you're up against."

He staggered to his horse and after several attempts managed to fork his saddle. Without a backward glance he rode off, the subdued waddies trailing behind him.

"Now what did Mose mean by that threat?" wondered one of the guards. "Alex Tobin ain't no quick-draw man, and Mose Hatch knows it."

Hatfield smiled slightly but did not answer.

"And I reckon this will sort of tighten a latigo on the talk that Mose Hatch has the fastest gun hand in Texas," another guard remarked in low tones. "Why, he never even smoked!"

Two days later the surveying party passed beyond the Triangle D holdings. Hatfield rode back to Sanders, leaving two of his men to convoy the party over the wild lands to the southwest.

"Got across without any trouble," he reported to Superintendent Barrington.

"That so?" Barrington remarked drily. "Understand Mose Hatch fell off his horse or something and busted his arm. Anyhow, he's packing it in a sling."

Barrington later got the story from the two guards who had ridden back to town with Hatfield. He broached the subject again when Hatfield returned to the office after he had eaten at the Greasy Sack.

"It looks like," Barrington commented, "that Hatch was deliberately sent over there to kill you."

"Reckon he was," Hatfield admitted.

Barrington shook his head. "I would never have believed Alex Tobin would do such a thing," he said.

"He didn't," Hatfield replied.

"Then who in hell did?" demanded the super.

"We'll come to that later," Hatfield said. "How are things goin' over to the tunnel?" He refused further comment on the previous subject.

HATFIELD met Renshaw the next day.

"I've got that information you wanted," said the engineer. "Got quite a letter dealing with it from the Chicago office. Seems the man who gave the field man the information concerning that river was Clay Sutton, the freighter. He gave them a lot of help when they were here. Showed them the best spot to strike the hills and loaned them a wagon and team to pack their supplies. He was cooperative, but it seems he slipped up about the river."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed drily, "he did."

Several quiet days followed, with the tunnel crew driving their bore at top speed. The solid granite had been replaced by earth and broken shale and the work speeded up in consequence.

"Another week and we'll be through!" exulted Renshaw. "And the M and K is still fighting hard rock. I'm beginning to feel confident for the first time that we'll win. But if that bridge had gone out, we'd be sunk. Hope you're here when Mr. Dunn shows up, Hatfield. He'll sure want to thank you for what you did."

Five days later the last cubic yard of earth was removed and the bore was complete. A temporary track was hastily laid beyond the west mouth and a locomotive chugged triumphantly through the tunnel to the accompaniment of deafening cheers from the assembled workers and a crowd of citizens from Sanders who had ridden out to witness the consummation of the project.

"Why, darned if there isn't old Alex Tobin with the bunch from town!" Barrington exclaimed in astonishment.

Hatfield chuckled, and did not appear to be particularly surprised. He strode across to where Tobin stood and smiled down at the old rancher. Tobin glowered for an instant, then stuck out a big paw.

"I know when I'm licked, son," he said, "and I hope I'm big enough to pack a lickin' without bellerin'." Suddenly

his youthful grin brightened his face. "Fact is," he admitted, "I've been sort of pluggin' for you ever since I heard about what you did to save that bridge. It ain't easy to stay on the prod against fellers who make a fight like that. Drop over to my place and see me some time. And if there's any favor I can do you, don't hold back on askin'."

"You can do me a big favor right now, suh," Hatfield replied gravely.

"Ask it," Tobin instantly countered.

"You can answer a question, suh," Hatfield said. "Why did you and your bunch come into the Greasy Sack that night a few weeks ago, looking for trouble?"

"Why," answered Tobin, "Mose Hatch told me that Clay Sutton was goin' around braggin' that if me and the boys come to town, him and his bunch figured to send us packin' with fleas in our ears. I rode in with the boys to see if he meant it, but the railroaders started a row, and you know how that ended."

"Much obliged, suh," Hatfield said. "Now do me one more favor—forget I ever asked you the question."

Tobin shook his head in bewilderment. "I can't figure what this is all about," he said, "but I'll do as you say."

"You'll learn later." Hatfield smiled as he walked away.

As Hatfield paused to talk with Renshaw, Clay Sutton approached.

"Congratulations," he told the engineer. "You've won your fight. The M and K is still pounding rock and it will take them at least another week to get through. You won't have any trouble keeping ahead of them from now on. Preston Carvel, the M and K president, is admitting he's licked. I heard he figures to wire Jaggers Dunn for a conference about service through the pass."

"He'll get his lease," grunted Renshaw. "Which is more than Dunn would have got out of him if he'd beaten us."

JIM HATFIELD accompanied Renshaw through the tunnel. The engineer rubbed his hands together complacently as they surveyed the bore by the light of flares.

"Nothing more to do but replace the wooden shoring with masonry," he said. "It's strong now, but we can't trust timber once heavy trains start going through. The vibration would be too great. And also there's always the chance of sparks from the locomotive setting fire to the timbers. That stuff is dry, seasoned wood and would burn easily with a draft always pulling through here like it does.

"If the shoring should give way we'd have the whole mountain down on our heads and it would be a mess. A lot harder to get through than the original bore. It would keep coming and coming and there would be no end to it. But we can take our time with the masonry. Getting through so the steel can be laid on west was the important thing. We'd have bored from both ends if it had been practicable to get materials over these infernal hills.

"Well, we're all set now. The night shift will tidy up and take care of odds and ends, then knock off. There'll be no work tomorrow and tomorrow night. Tomorrow is pay-day and the whole force will be in town for a royal bust. I reckon the boys have earned it. They've sure done themselves proud. Barrington has instructions to hand out a bonus to everybody. Should be quite a night in Sanders, tomorrow night."

Hatfield turned his head at a sound behind them. The crowd that was following them through the bore had drawn close.

Clay Sutton was walking almost at Renshaw's elbow.

Shortly after dark, Sheriff Blount was sitting in his office when the door opened and Jim Hatfield entered.

"Howdy," greeted the sheriff. "Everything peaceful?"

"It is, right at the moment," Hatfield replied.

"Which is more than it'll be tomorrow and tomorrow night," Blount growled disgustedly. "Them rock busters will be raisin' hell and shovin' chunks under

the corners. There'll be more ruckuses than you can shake a stick at. I figure to have my hands full keepin' somethin' like order. Well, it will be about the last real big bust for Sanders. Next week they'll move the camp on west of the tunnel and they won't get back here again. Next pay-day, or the one after, at the most, Marton should be catchin' it . . . Take a load off your feet, Hatfield."

CHAPTER XV

The Lone Wolf

NODDING, Hatfield sat down. He rolled a cigarette and regarded the old peace officer through the veil of blue smoke.

"Want to talk to you about tomorrow night," he said.

He was fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt as he spoke. He laid something on the sheriff's desk.

Sheriff Blount stared at the object, his eyes widening. It was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers.

"You—you're a Ranger!" he stammered. He raised his gaze to Hatfield's face, his eyes glowing. "And I got you placed!" he exclaimed. "Been wonderin' who you reminded me of, somebody I've heard a lot about. You're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted with a smile.

Sheriff Blount stared at the man whose exploits were legend throughout the Southwest.

"And Bill McDowell sent you over here?"

"That's right," Hatfield agreed. "Jaggers Dunn wired McDowell and asked him to send me. That's how I happened to be on the material train that day I got a chance to stop that run-away. Dunn had become convinced that somebody other than the M and K was stirrin' up trouble here and tryin' to keep the C and P from reachin' the pass first."

"You mean Alex Tobin?" interpolated the sheriff.

Hatfield shook his head. "Tobin is an above-board fighter," he replied. "Dunn didn't pay Tobin any mind. He's walloped too many of that kind to give Tobin much thought. And he couldn't see Preston Carvel, the M and K president, doing the sort of things that had been done to delay the construction work. And the day I got here I knew for sure Carvel wasn't back of it.

"I know Carvel well, by reputation. He's a fighter and sometimes his methods may not be exactly orthodox, to put it kindly, but I know he would never condone mass killin' such as was attempted with the dynamite cars that day. Nor any kind of killin', for that matter. So I had to find somebody else who would profit if the C and P lost the race to the pass. It wasn't hard to do. In fact, it was so plain that the only explanation I can hit on why somebody else didn't tumble to it is that everybody was too busy thinkin' about the M and K and Alex Tobin."

Hatfield paused to roll another cigarette.

"But if not Tobin or the M and K, who in thunder is it?" the sheriff demanded helplessly.

Hatfield touched a match to his finished cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Clay Sutton," he said quietly.

"Clay Sutton!" gulped the sheriff. "Why would Sutton try to hold up the C and P?"

"As I said," Hatfield repeated, "it's so plain anybody should be able to see it. If the C and P builds its line to the south, Sutton will lose his profitable wagon freightin' business. Also, his big-money smugglin' operations will be destroyed or stopped. The railroad will carry the freight his wagons now handle. It will greatly increase the population in the Southwest, which will make smug-

glin' too hazardous to pay. Sutton stands to lose out in every direction. He knew, of course, that if the C and P lost the race to the pass, the southern line would never be built. So he set out to make the C and P lose, and bein' absolutely snake-blooded, he stopped at nothin'."

HATFIELD paused to pinch out his cigarette butt. The sheriff swore a crackling oath.

"Sutton has plenty of savvy, but he slipped here and there," Hatfield resumed. "He slipped when he eased Bert King into the guard force and told you King worked for the Slash K down around Presidio. I investigated that after I got to wonderin' about King and learned King never worked for the Slash K. They never heard of him down there."

"So King was in on it, too!" growled the sheriff.

"Yes," Hatfield said. "He's one of Sutton's men. King is a cold proposition with considerably savvy, but not quite enough. He was smart when he left his horse behind after killin' Bill Purdy and blowin' the pier. But he left the horse he used for a get-away tied close to the scene of the killin'. I found where the horse had been tied. He also slipped when he left footprints where he stood talkin' to Purdy before strikin' him down. Those prints showed plain enough that Purdy had been killed by a man he thought he had no reason to fear. Which would naturally be King. The prints were made by somebody wearin' cowboy boots, which none of the workers at the camp ever wear. Plainly pointed to King."

"Uh-huh, everything plumb plain, to somebody like the Lone Wolf," interpolated the sheriff. "Go on."

"Sutton slipped also when he sent Mose Hatch to do for me over on the survey line," Hatfield continued. "He confirmed my belief that Hatch was in with him. Hatch has a mighty fast gun hand and Sutton gambled that he would shade me if it came to a show-down. He didn't. I've a notion Sutton knows who I am—knew from the start. I've been in this section before. He decided I must be got out of the way. That's why he drygulched us there in the canyon the day I arrived here."

"How in blazes did you catch on that Hatch was in with Sutton?"

"I suspected it the night of the ruckus in the Greasy Sack," Hatfield replied. "I was watchin' Hatch all the time, figurin' he was the dangerous man of the bunch. Hatch kept over to one side, in the clear, all the time, and he appeared to be lookin' to Sutton for orders. I don't know for sure, but I believe Alex Tobin had been lined up to get his that night."

"Why?"

"From what I've been able to learn, if anything happened to Tobin, Hatch would get control of the Triangle D," Hatfield explained. "That was Sutton's bribe to him for throwin' in with him. I imagine a little side line that night was for me to stop a stray slug in the course of the shindig. But the boys and I busted things up before they got goin' good."

"What else?" asked the sheriff.

"Remember the dynamite you told me Hatch bought? Well, the cover up there was that it was to be used to blow out a water-hole. A water-hole that was blown out, all right. But three boxes of dynamite would blow all the water-holes on the Triangle D and leave some over. Another slip, the sort the owlhoot brand always make. Not that it proved anything for sure, but just added a mite more to bolster up other things."

"Plenty!" growled the sheriff. "I aim to drop a loop on those sidewinders right away."

But Hatfield smiled and shook his head.

"They'd just make you a laughing stock," he said. "There's not one bit of proof against either Sutton or Hatch that would stand up in court. If we had King and could force him to talk, it might be another story, but I've a notion King is being kept under cover proper, and if it looked like we would drop a loop on him, he'd be killed as cold-blood-

edly as were Bill Purdy and that poor brakeman over on the ridge."

"Then what in time are we to do?" the sheriff asked helplessly. "We can't let them sidewinders crawl around and fang somebody else."

JIM HATFIELD shook his head.

"I'm goin' to play a hunch," he said. "A hunch that Sutton will make one last desperate try to win the game he apparently has lost. I believe he will make a try for the tunnel tomorrow night. I caught him listenin' when Renshaw was tellin' me what would happen if the wooden shorin' supportin' the walls and roof of the west third of the bore should collapse or catch fire from locomotive sparks. I think that talk gave Sutton an idea. He sure looked like somethin' was cooking up in his mind. If he could slide in there and set fire to the shoring, the tunnel would collapse and the M and K would win hands down."

"And you think he might make the try tomorrow night?" the sheriff asked excitedly.

"If he's ever goin' to try it," Hatfield returned confidently. "Tomorrow night the set-up is perfect for him, or so he will think. All the workers will be in town for their pay-day bust. I had a little talk with my boys and they're tellin' it around that they will all be off duty tomorrow and tomorrow night, except two assigned to guard the bridge. I'm bankin' on a hunch that Sutton will think we've forgotten all about the tunnel. The owlhoot brand always figure they're smarter than anybody else. I'm countin' on it that Sutton will believe he is rememberin' what we have overlooked. If he falls for it, we'll have a chance to drop a loop on the whole bunch. Worth tryin', anyhow. . . ."

Sanders roared the following day. The pay car boomed in about mid-morning and a golden stream poured through the barred windows into the eager hands of the workers, who immediately proceeded to get rid of it in various ways that made for tumult and excitement.

Sheriff Blount was much in evidence. So were the railroad guards, who began celebrating early and by nightfall, to all appearances, were well fortified with red-eye, and in the need of sleep. One by one they lurched off to bed, or so they declared their intentions, to anybody who cared to listen.

At the west tunnel entrance all was dark and silent. The mouth of the bore yawned emptily, a blacker shadow amid the shadows. No sound came from the depths of the bore to indicate that men crouched in the spaces between the shoring timbers, alert and watchful, straining their ears to catch the slightest sound from the moon-silvered rangeland beyond. Ready to hand and slightly behind the silent watchers, lay a huge bundle of oil-soaked cotton waste.

Slowly, the hours passed. Midnight drew near.

"Beginnin' to look like we figured wrong," Sheriff Blount whispered to Hatfield.

"Take it easy," the Lone Wolf whispered back. "Takes time to ride around the hills and get here. And they wouldn't start till well after dark."

Another hour passed, and suddenly Hatfield whispered a warning. A moment later the others heard it, a faint clicking sound that steadily grew louder—the beat of horses' irons on the hard ground.

The clicking ceased and was followed by a popping of saddle leather and a jingling of bit irons as men dismounted. A light flared up at the tunnel mouth. The forms of men entering the tunnel were visible. Some carried large tin containers.

"All right!" said a voice that Hatfield instantly recognized as that of Clay Sutton. "All right, drench the timbers with the oil. Use plenty, all we brought. I'll set a light to it soon as you finish. Then let the damn fools see if they can dig through tomorrow. Hustle up! We want to get away from here. Strike another light, Mose, and help King unscrew those tops."

The shadowy forms moved to the side

walls of the tunnel. Clay Sutton was outlined in the light of the flare he held. The others bent over the cans of oil. They straightened with yells of alarm as a sheet of flame roared up in the dark beyond, flickering almost to the roof beams.

OUTLINED against the glare that dazzled the eyes of the owlhoots was Jim Hatfield. On his broad breast gleamed the star of the Rangers. His deep voice thundered through the sudden turmoil:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Clay Sutton, and you others, I arrest you for the killing of William Purdy. Anything you say—"

Clay Sutton, his handsome face a mask of rage and hate, screamed aloud. His right hand flashed down and up with a speed the eye could not follow. Flame gushed from his side.

But a split second before he pulled trigger, Jim Hatfield's long Colt boomed sullenly. The scream on Sutton's lips rose to a bubbling shriek. He fired again, the muzzle of his gun jerking and wobbling, then pitched forward on his face. Over his prone body, bullets hissed back and forth as the owlhoots and the posse shot it out.

After some moments, Jim Hatfield lowered his smoking guns, holstered one, and wiped away the blood that was streaming from a gashed cheek. The tunnel mouth was littered with bodies. Three men, including the desperately wounded Mose Hatch, were cowering against the tunnel wall, howling for mercy.

"Watch that fire!" Hatfield cautioned his men. "Don't let the timbers catch. Pick up that flare over there, Curt, and get the lanterns lit. The waste will burn down in a minute. Tie up those three horned toads, Sheriff. Anybody of our bunch bad hurt?"

"A few nicks," said the sheriff. "Mason has a busted arm. Reckon that's about the worst."

"I'll look after him in a minute."

"Sutton is done for, and so is King," said the sheriff. "You got 'em both. And Mose Hatch is goin' fast. Want to talk to him before he takes the Big Jump?"

Hatfield walked over to where Mose Hatch lay, his life draining out through his shattered lungs. The saturnine range boss looked up at him. His leathery face creased in a wan grin.

"You—were—right, Ranger," he gasped. "Sutton—wasn't—good enough either. Good—luck!"

His eyes closed wearily, his chest fell in and he was dead.

Hatfield gazed down at the still form. "A tough *hombre*," he said, "but he went out like a man."

After attending to the wounded and ascertaining that all were able to ride, Hatfield turned to the sheriff.

"Might as well be headin' back to town," he said. "It's been nice knowing you, Blount. Hope I'll see you again some time."

"Ain't you riding back with us?" the sheriff asked in surprise. "Folks will want to thank you for what you did."

Hatfield smiled, and shook his head. "I'm heading west," he said. "Captain Bill has another little chore lined up for me. Tell everybody good-by for me, including Superintendent Thompson."

"Superintendent Thompson?" the sheriff repeated in surprise.

"Yes, Chuck Thompson, the tunnel boss. I wired Jaggers Dunn and asked him to promote Chuck, to make him construction superintendent and assistant to Renshaw. I don't think he'll turn me down. I've known him for years. Well, *adios*, and as Mose Hatch said, good luck!"

They watched him ride away through the silvery moonlight, tall and straight atop his great golden horse, a look of pleased anticipation in his strangely colored eyes, to where duty called and new adventure waited.

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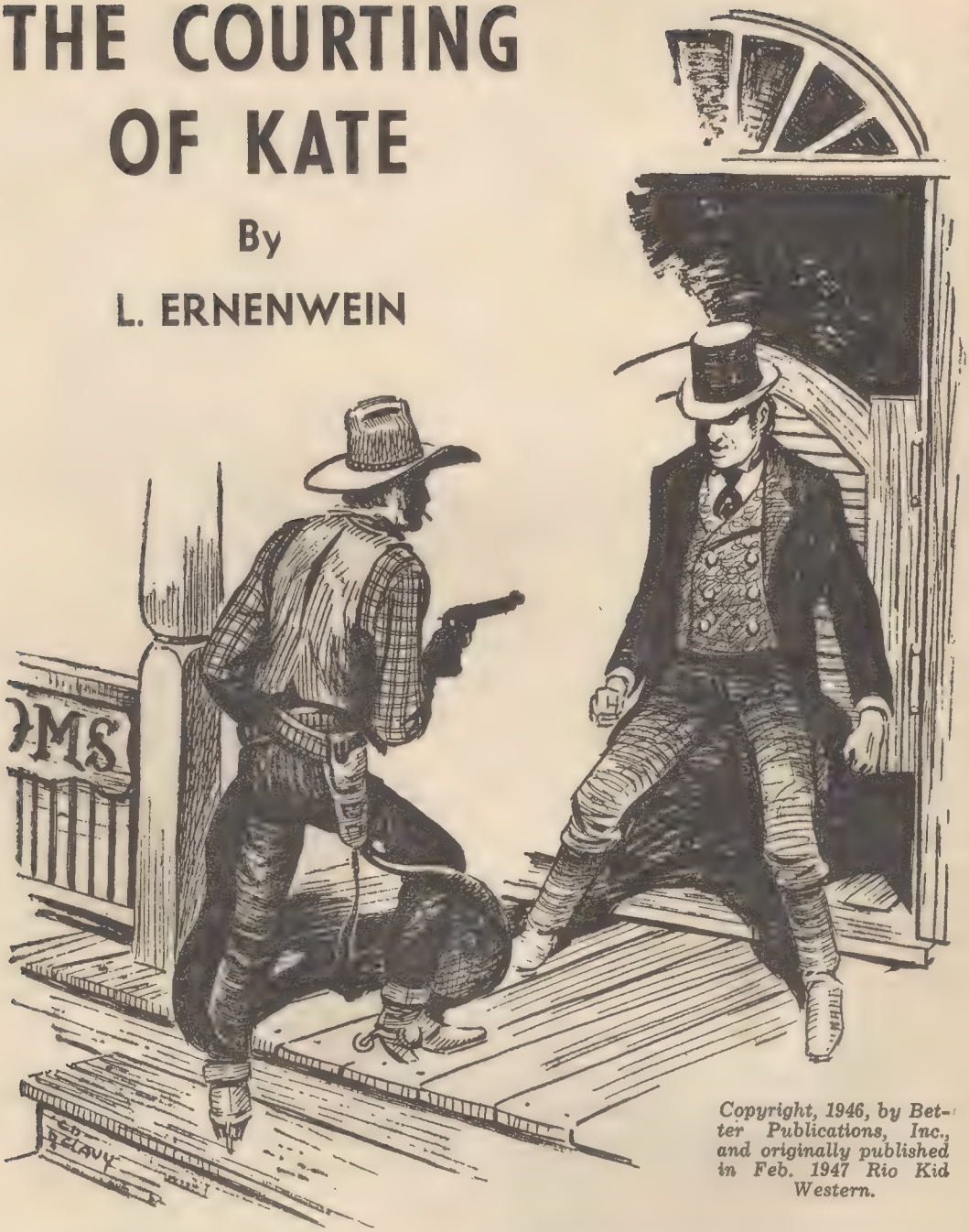
Coming Next Month: RUSTLERS RIDE, Another Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel by Jackson Cole!

THE COURTING OF KATE

By

L. ERNENWEIN



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O'Shea wanted to listen to his heart, but his conscience talked louder!

THE westward thrust of railroad construction turned Broken Bow into a rough-and-tumble boomtown in one week's time.

Main Street's plank walls resounded to the tramp of muscular, maul-swinging

spikemen, swaggering gandydancers and leather-lunged graders. Tents and flimsy frame structures sprouted in fantastic fashion on vacant lots. Dust-hazed freight wagons rumbled into town at all hours and westbound stagecoaches carried capacity loads of sharp-eyed land sharks, tinhorn gamblers and painted percentage girls.

As Sheamus O'Shea aptly expressed it: "Every day is Saturday, begorrah!"

O'Shea, bald-domed proprietor of the Alhambra Saloon, stood now on the Oriental Cafe stoop after partaking of a bounteous breakfast. He had the drowsy look of a man not quite asleep and not quite awake, which was approximately how he felt, for Sheamus had never acquired the habit of early rising. Even as a boy he had questioned the wisdom of the early bird proposition and had informed his father that he wasn't interested in catching worms.

In the ten years that O'Shea had been in Broken Bow he had never shown his pink-cheeked cherubic face on Main Street before ten o'clock in the morning. That was why "Close-shave" Pelky stopped and stared at Sheamus in bug-eyed astonishment.

"What are you doing up at this hour?" the barber demanded.

O'Shea shrugged. "'Tis not of my choosin'," he said sheepishly. He pointed toward the lot next to his saloon where a construction crew was working. "Them spalpeens," he explained, "unloaded a cargo of canvas and lumber outside me window at eight o'clock. The mule skinner who drove the wagon bellowed like a banshee, then they flung each board down separate so's it would bounce the higher and make more noise. How's a man to sleep with such hullabaloos burstin' his ear drums?"

Pelky, whose militant wife insisted that he open his barbershop at nine o'clock sharp each morning, nodded sympathetically.

"This boom will be the death of us all," he complained. "I sheared thirteen men yesterday. Five of them were drunk, three had black eyes, and two wore hide-out guns strapped to their left shoulders. Just as I was closing up a gambler named Ace-high Halliday threatened to shoot all the shaving mugs on my shelves unless I gave him a haircut. Then, when I went to tell Sheriff Sam Odegarde about it, I learn Sam is out at the east end of the county investigating the death of a sheepherder. No telling what'll happen here now."

"A riffraff bunch," O'Shea reflected. "This town reminds me of Dodge City, which was a divil's den if ever I saw one. No wonder the railroad is bringin' its own peace officer to preserve law and order. Sheriff Sam couldn't cope with such wholesale shenanigans all by hisself." Then a vague thought came to him, and he added: "Seems like I remember a man named Ace-high Halliday. What does he look like?"

"Medium tall, with a black mustache and shifty eyes."

"Must be a different galoot," Sheamus said. "The Halliday I knew didn't have a mustache."

Pelky glanced toward the Alhambra.

"What are they putting up next to your place?" he asked.

"A circus tent on a wood platform, by the look of it," Sheamus said. "Bad cess to 'em, for disturbin' my sleep." Then, as he observed workmen fastening guy-ropes to the east wall of his saloon, he blurted: "What do them banshee baboons think they're doin'?"

HE STRODE down Main Street with more swiftness than Pelky had ever seen him move.

O'Shea's usually benign countenance bore the deep-rutted frown of a thoroughly wrathful Irishman.

"The brass of them dudes, hitchin' their dirty canvas to a respectable establishment!" he fumed, and was seething with righteous resentment when he rushed up to the trio of tent-raisers.

"That," he announced, pointing to the Alhambra, "is no public hitchrack. 'Tis private property!"

The nearest workman barely glanced at him before pounding another spike into

the wall. "Your name O'Shea?" he asked.

"It is that," Sheamus declared. "And what might ye be up to?"

"Just usin' your wall to anchor our guy-ropes," the man reported. "Boss said you wouldn't mind."

Sheer astonishment bugged O'Shea's eyes.

"Ah—so I wouldn't mind, wouldn't I? What does your boss take me for? A donkey-eared North-of-Ireland dude, or some goose-pimpled peddler fresh out of Kansas City? Does he think I'm a bull butterfly that'll be brushed aside by the flick of a hand?" He shook a big forefinger in front of the workman's face and shouted: "Go tell your boss that this saloon belongs to Sheamus O'Shea, blood brother of the Black O'Sheas, any one of which could lick ten of the likes of him with a broom handle before breakfast seven days a week—and not miss early mass on Sunday mornin'!"

The workman took a moment to digest this Celtic harangue.

"Be gone with ye, now," Sheamus ordered, "and tell your boss I'll not be bamboozled by the hog-minded likes of him!"

"But my boss ain't a he," the man explained. "She's a she."

The surprise of that held Sheamus while he recalled the unsavory establishments run by painted ladies in Dodge City. He had always prided himself on running a highly respectable saloon. If one of those nefarious honkytonks should open next door, it would ruin his reputation.

"What kind of a kickapoo place does your lady boss run?" Sheamus demanded.

"A high-class dance hall," the man informed. "Kate's Canvas Coliseum—one dollar a dance."

A sigh of relief slipped from O'Shea's lips. Anyone named Kate was likely to be Irish, in which case the establishment would be half-way respectable, at least.

"But I still say ye'll not use my saloon for a hitchrack," Sheamus insisted. "Your boss bein' a woman don't change that at all, begorrah."

At that moment a sweet-toned voice with the lilt of a brogue in it, sounded directly behind O'Shea:

"Top of the morning to you, Sheamus."

O'Shea whirled, and stared.

"Kate Finucane, as I live and breathe!" he whispered.

She was a fine figure of a woman, this Kate Finucane. Garbed in a stylish gray gown and wearing a modest little pancake hat perched atop a proudly held head, she was a woman to make any man think of moonlight and malarky.

"Ye look scarcely a day older," Sheamus declared, eyeing her in critical fashion, and reciting her charms. "Hair with the blue sheen of a soaring black falcon's wing, eyes green as the Emerald Isle, lips red as ripe cherries." Then he glanced at her ringless fingers. "Do ye mean to tell me there's been no weddin' bells in the ten years since I last saw ye in Dodge City?" he exclaimed.

"Not a bell, Sheamus," Kate Finucane said smilingly. She gestured toward the huge tent. "This belongs to my brother Pat, who's serving six months in Texas for half killing two carpetbaggers with his fists. Pat should be free any day now."

But Sheamus O'Shea wasn't interested in that at all. He was endeavoring to guess Kate's age, to tally her years as compared to his own. She looked no more than thirty, yet she had seemed that old ten years ago. Perhaps, Sheamus thought eagerly, there wasn't so great a difference between his age and hers as he had imagined.

O'Shea stood straight as a buggy whip, wanting to appear younger and less paunchy than he felt. Bachelorhood was a fine thing for young bucks, but living alone plagued a man when he reached middle age. It made him want to stick his feet under his own table of an evening and eat home-cooked "vittles."

He recalled that Kate had kept company with a Texas cowboy called Jeff Blake.

"Didn't that proud-eyed Texan come back after the night ye saved his bacon by runnin' to fetch Marshal Masterson?" he asked.

"No," Kate said, and she was no longer

smiling. "I didn't see Jeff again until a year ago, and he scarcely spoke. He's a railroad lawman now, Sheamus. They call him Blue Blake now, instead of Jeff, because he's so strict and solemn."

"Ah—then he's the one that's comin' here," O'Shea said thoughtfully. "I've heard tall tales about Blue Blake, never dreamin' he was the one I knew in Dodge. They say he hates all humanity, includin' himself." Then as he observed a tall, sober-faced man coming along the plank walk, he exclaimed: "Speak of the divils, here comes Blake!"

IT WAS an odd thing, this meeting. Because Jeff Blake and Kate Finucane were part of O'Shea's robustious past, he felt ten years younger. Genuine pleasure showed on his smiling face, as he shook hands with "Blue" Blake.

" 'Tis like a reunion," Sheamus declared. "You and Kate and me all in the same town again."

A frugal grin briefly warmed Blake's lean, darkly handsome face.

"Glad to see you, Sheamus," he said, and went on without looking at Kate Finucane.

"Now why would Jeff pass ye by without so much as a word?" O'Shea asked, deeply puzzled by such deliberate rudeness.

Kate shrugged. "He's a woman-hater, and I guess he hates me worst of all."

"But why?" Sheamus demanded. "Shure and he can't blame you because he knocked down a gunhawk hooligan whose three friends ganged up on him afterward."

"Jeff came close to dying that night," Kate said defensively. "He was no gunfighter — just a good-natured cowboy. Marshal Masterson told me afterward that Jeff knew he couldn't outshoot any one of those three gunhawks, and was pale as a ghost when Marshal Ed stepped up beside him. The marshal said he advised Jeff to get out of Dodge quick and stay out until he learned how to shoot fast. Jeff took his advice."

O'Shea watched Blake walk to Pelky's barbershop, his big black gun swaying gently in its tied-down halfbreed holster.

"Jeff had a right to be scared, him bein' no great shakes with a gun at that time," Sheamus said. "But he's got no right to treat ye so shamefully."

"I guess he thinks I was flirting with the man he knocked down," Kate explained. "Maybe I did flirt a trifle, Sheamus, but only to make Jeff want me the more."

"Ah—so that's how it is," O'Shea mused, seeing the misty shine of unshed tears in her eyes. "Jeff Blake is the reason there's been no weddin' bells, eh, Kate?"

She nodded.

" 'Twas in me mind to court ye, Kate," O'Shea said regretfully, "but I guess ye'll have a case on Jeff Blake as long as he lives."

Kate nodded again. . . .

By noon the big tent was securely pitched. When a piano and numerous benches had been installed, Kate's Canvas Coliseum was ready for business.

Other establishments were erected with equal swiftness. A shooting gallery tent rose next door to the dance hall. Across Main Street a crew of carpenters hammered huge sections of a clapboard cafe into place by mid-afternoon, and soon after that "Ace-high" Halliday, who had rented an abandoned building just west of O'Shea's saloon, hung out a big red-lettered sign which said: HALLIDAY'S ALHAMBRA.

Sheamus happened to be standing in the doorway of his establishment at the time. He squinted up at the sign and swore gustily.

"The nerve of him!" he blurted. " 'Tis not enough that the spalpeen opens a saloon at me elbow—he borrows the good name of me place to boot!"

Sheamus strode up to the gaudily garbed gambler who was wiping his hands on a white silk handkerchief.

"You Ace-high Halliday?" he demanded belligerently.

The gambler nodded, and tugged thoughtfully on a waxed tip of his black mustache.

"It seems as if I've seen your homely

face somewheres before," he said in a bland and brazen voice.

" 'Tis not faces I am discussin' at this time," O'Shea declared. "It's names. Business names. My establishment has been well and favorably known in this town for ten years as the Alhambra Saloon. I do not like the idea of a fly-by-night trap using the name Alhambra also."

Halliday laughed, and shrugged. He spoke to a blocky, gun-hung man who lounged in the doorway.

"Look who's objectin', Bart." Then, having given O'Shea's face a probing appraisal, he exclaimed: "I remember you now! Sheamus O'Shea, who wore an apron behind the bar at the Alamo in Dodge City."

"Seems like this is an unfriendly town, Boss," said Bart Hower, whose beefy, pockpitted face wore a perpetual grin. "Marshal Blake says we can't open after midnight, Kate Finucane won't speak to you, and this ape-faced son don't like the name of your joint."

Halliday chuckled, and as he did, O'Shea recognized him despite the mustache.

"Ain't you the one that Blake knocked down that night in the Last Chance Saloon?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Halliday said, and quit smiling. A savage scowl rutted his cheeks. "Blake got away with it because Ed Masterson butted in," he muttered angrily. "But he won't have Masterson with him when he tries to make me put out my lights at twelve tonight."

"We'll put something out," Bart promised, and nudged the double-rigged guns he wore in tied-down holsters. "But it won't be our lamps."

"Blake's lamp might go out," Halliday said, and the coldly calculating tone of his voice told Sheamus all he needed to know.

HALLIDAY hated Jeff Blake for the fist-whipping ten years ago and was eagerly waiting for a chance to settle that score. But Halliday wouldn't use his fists. He would use the hide-out gun Close-shave Pelky had spoken about, and he would have Bart's guns to make it a cinch proposition. "Blue" Blake wouldn't have a chance to survive such a setup. All the gun skill in the world wouldn't help a man when the odds were that high against him.

Sheamus recalled what he had said to Kate Finucane—that she would have "a case" on Jeff Blake as long as he lived.

"What you going to do about my sign?" Halliday demanded.

Sheamus shook his head. He glanced at Bart's wickedly grinning face.

"Nary a thing," he muttered.

"Parable" Plunkett came across the street for his afternoon glass of bourbon, and Sheamus walked hurriedly to the Alhambra Saloon. Because the high hope of courting Kate Finucane was like a warm glow inside him, O'Shea muttered thoughtfully: "As long as he lives. . . ."

Sheamus was having a leisurely drink with Doc Plunkett at the bar when Jeff Blake came into the Alhambra.

"Have a drink on the house," O'Shea invited smilingly, and reached for his private bottle of bourbon.

Blake shook his head. "Booze and a law badge don't mix," he said. "Especially in a tough town like this."

Plunkett, who had won the nickname of Parable because of his habitual spouting of philosophical phrases at the slightest provocation, smacked the rosewood bar with an age-mottled hand.

"I object!" he exclaimed pompously, and arranged his battered stovepipe hat at a more respectable angle. "Broken Bow is not tough in any sense of the word. It has been known far and wide as the finest town in Arizona Territory, a veritable paradise with its peaceful and prosperous populace abiding in harmonious fellowship."

"I suppose," Blake said sarcastically, "that the three shootin's and twenty-odd fights they had here durin' the last week are your idea of harmonious fellowship."

Parable Plunkett smacked the rosewood again.

"I resent your flippant and fallacious interpretation of our town," he declared.

"Broken Bow is not tough. It's the riffraff bunch your railroad brought here that is tough. You have no right to malign the respectable population of Broken Bow by pestilential remarks about it's being a tough town, and I demand your apology!"

Blake ignored the old medico's request.

"I stopped by to tell you that a citizens' committee has agreed that all saloons and dancehalls shall close promptly at midnight," he said to O'Shea, "so our construction crews will be fit to work the next day, I expect you to observe the twelve o'clock curfew tonight and every other night."

"So?" Sheamus said, not liking the autocratic tone of Blake's voice or the arrogant expression on his frowning face. "Well, if it was me habit to remain open later I might question your curfew and tell the committee to mind their own blasted business. But I've always closed me place at midnight and will continue to do so."

"Good," Blake acknowledged without pleasure.

He was near the door when O'Shea asked slyly: "Does Ace-high Halliday's lights go out at twelve also?"

"They will," Blake muttered, and went outside.

O'Shea downed his drink in thoughtful silence. Blake, he guessed, didn't realize what he would be up against at Halliday's Alhambra. Perhaps Jeff hadn't recognized Halliday as being the man he had knocked down that night in the Alamo, for the mustache changed Halliday's appearance considerably.

It occurred to Sheamus that he should warn Blake. But Jeff had refused an invitation to a friendly drink, referring to good bourbon as booze. And he had talked with a badge-toter tone of voice. There could never be any close friendship between them; merely a speaking acquaintance.

Sheamus shrugged. If Blue Blake got shot down at midnight, that was his hard luck. But it might mean all the difference in the world to Sheamus O'Shea who stood no chance of courting Kate Finucane while Blake lived.

"A most unpleasant person," Parable Plunkett complained. "No wonder they call him Blue Blake."

"He's a woman-hater, Doc. The most beautiful female that ever braided her hair hurt Jeff's pride ten years ago."

"Pride—a drinkless trickle in the sands of time," Plunkett scoffed.

WHEN Plunkett had departed and bar trade was quiet because of the supper hour, O'Shea sauntered into the wide doorway of Kate's Canvas Coliseum. The big tent was deserted, and he was returning to his saloon when Kate came along the sidewalk.

"It was in me mind to request the honor of escortin' ye to the Oriental Cafe for supper," Sheamus reported. "Am I too late?"

She nodded. "I've just finished, more's the pity," she said with a smile.

The sweet curve of Kate's lips and the warm glow of her green eyes stirred O'Shea mightily. Here, he thought, was the grandest girl in all the land, a priceless gem of glorious womanhood. Except for Jeff Blake, she might become Mrs. Sheamus O'Shea.

What could she possibly see in that frowning fool of a badge-toter? The man had no romance in him, no appreciation for the wondrous charms this colleen possessed so abundantly.

Yet Kate could see no other man while Blake lived. Well, by this time tomorrow, Blue Blake might not exist. Then, Sheamus reflected, there would be no barrier between him and Kate.

He was thinking about that, and enjoying a warm glow of anticipation, when Bart strode over from Halliday's Alhambra.

"Ace-high wants to borrow a couple of your bracket lamps," Bart announced. "Two of our big chandeliers got broke on the way here, which means we've only got one left."

"Then why in Hooligan's name don't ye buy some lamps at the Mercantile?" O'Shea demanded.

"They're all sold out," Bart said. "Come

on into your place and I'll pick out the ones we want."

Resentment rose like a wave in Sheamus O'Shea.

"So ye'll pick and choose, will ye!" he exclaimed, and shook his fist in front of Bart's bulbous, pock-pitted nose. "Go tell Ace-high Halliday he'll get no lamps from me—not so much as a candle, begorrah!"

The gunman's grin didn't change. But his eyes did, and Kate Finucane saw what was in them.

"Be careful, Sheamus," she said urgently.

Bart turned toward the Alhambra.

"I'll take what I want," he said. O'Shea stepped swiftly around him, reached his saloon doorway and stood there blocking the entrance.

"Ye'll not step foot in me place at all!" he declared, and heard the tap of Kate's high heels departing.

Bart eased up to the Alhambra stoop, his wicked grin distorting his features.

"I'll borrow some lamps from you, one way or the other," he insisted, and drew his right-hand gun.

"Ye wouldn't dast shoot a respectable citizen in his own doorway," O'Shea said, with more confidence than he felt.

Bart's grin deepened the ruts on his beefy cheeks.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," he said. "But one thing is shore. I'm goin' to bend the barrel of this gun on your hard head if you don't step aside *muy pronto!*"

Sheamus O'Shea peered into Bart's cold eyes and knew the man meant it. He guessed, too, how easily Bart's gun would explode if he, Sheamus, put up a struggle to fend off the blow that might crack his skull.

"Holster your pistol and fight with the tools Nature give ye," Sheamus invited.

Bart shook his head. "This'll be quicker, and easier," he muttered, moving forward.

"What's going on?" Marshal Blue Blake called sharply.

Bart sheathed his gun. He looked at Blake.

"I was trying to talk O'Shea into lending me a couple bracket lamps," he said casually. "But he don't seem to be in a lending mood."

He walked off then, and Sheamus loosed a gusty sigh of relief.

"I got something important to tell ye," O'Shea said to Blake. Taking the marshal by the arm, he escorted him inside. "It'll sound better with a glass of bourbon."

So Sheamus O'Shea, who couldn't court Kate Finucane while Jeff Blake lived, warned the railroad marshal against a death trap that awaited him at Halliday's Alhambra.

"They're goin' to shoot ye to doll ribbons, Jeff. They're goin' to gang up on ye so there'll be no chance at all."

Then Blue Blake, who hadn't taken a drink of whisky for ten long, lonely years, downed two glasses of bourbon between sundown and dark. . . .

Word of the impending showdown at Halliday's Alhambra spread rapidly through Broken Bow. By ten o'clock that night it had reached every home on Residential Avenue. Wild rumors and reports flooded the town. Men who had heard tall tales of Blue Blake's career as a gunslick town tamer, repeated every exaggerated story they had ever heard about him.

"Cold-eyed and cold-nerved," they said. "A natural born killer who never smiles."

BY ELEVEN o'clock small groups of curious citizens stood in dark passageways between buildings on Main Street, their eyes and voices sharp with anticipation as they discussed Blake's chances of success.

"He'll never reach the batwings," one man prophesied. "They'll shoot him down the minute he steps foot on the front stoop."

Another man disagreed. "Halliday is too smart for that," he said. "He'll wait till Blake tries to arrest him. Then somebody in the saloon crowd will take a sneak shot at Blake."

At eleven forty-five Bart Hower entered Halliday's Alhambra and spoke to his boss.

"All sorts of stories going around," he reported. "Nobody's seen Blake for the past couple hours. Some say he was seen

boarding a work train that went east. And the livery stable proprietor says a man rode off to get Sheriff Sam Odegarde. I looked into O'Shea's place three different times, but I didn't see Blake."

Halliday frowned. "The coyote might of got spooked and hightailed for the tules," he muttered, "But we'll get set for him in case he shows up."

During the next few minutes Bart and two other gun-hung men took up strategic posts around the smoke-fogged, dimly lighted room so that the front doorway made a triple-pronged target for their waiting guns.

At five minutes to twelve Kate Finucane closed her Canvas Coliseum and found Sheamus O'Shea awaiting her on the sidewalk.

"Already closed me place," he told her. "I'll escort ye to the hotel."

"Do you think Jeff has a chance?" Kate asked nervously.

The deep worry in her voice roused a hot flare of jealousy in O'Shea. It seemed incredible that a woman would be so loyal to the man who had run off without saying good-by, especially after she had helped save his life.

"Blake had warnin' enough," Sheamus muttered. "I told him how Halliday was plannin' to trap him."

But he didn't tell her that he had promised to unlock his back door for Blake's use at midnight.

The tightening pressure of Kate's fingers on his arm put a high gladness in O'Shea. "Thanks, Sheamus," she said. "You're the nicest man I ever knew."

At this precise moment, as they were going up the Mansion House Hotel steps, a gun's muffled blast came from Halliday's Alhambra. O'Shea whirled.

"Halliday's lights went out!" he heard a man on the hotel veranda shout.

"Right on the dot at midnight, by grab!" another man yelled.

Then, as several guns exploded, a crowd of shouting railroad workers and shrieking percentage girls stampeded from Halliday's Alhambra.

Listening to the continuous firing, Sheamus knew what had happened. Blake had entered the saloon by its rear door, had shot out the single chandelier and endeavored to make his getaway across the yard to the back door of O'Shea's Alhambra. But that door was locked! Blake was trapped!

O'Shea became aware of Kate's grip on his arm. "Please, oh please, let Jeff live!" he heard her whisper.

For a moment, as the guns continued to blast, Sheamus O'Shea stood undecided. If Blake died out there in the rubbish-littered yard, there might be a good chance of marrying this sweet-faced woman who had called him the nicest man she had ever known. But Jeff Blake had saved him from a sure pistol-whipping and possible shooting only this afternoon. A man couldn't forget that, even if it meant losing his chance to court Kate Finucane.

"I know a way to save Jeff—if he's still alive," Sheamus said quickly.

HASTILY elbowing his way through the excited crowd that thronged Main Street, O'Shea entered his saloon, ran quickly down the dark barroom and unlocked the rear door. Almost at once Blake came sliding through the dark doorway.

"Thought you'd forgot to unlock it," he panted.

"I remembered just in time," O'Shea muttered, and led Blake into a small bedroom where a low turned bracket lamp cast a frugal glow. "Make yourself comfortable while I fetch us a bottle."

When Sheamus returned to the room, Blake had placed the lamp on the floor at the foot of the bed so there would be no telltale silhouette on the window curtain.

"I'll have to watch close from now till daylight," Blake said, "so's I'll be in shape to arrest Halliday tomorrow."

O'Shea nodded, and poured Blake a brimming drink.

"Confusion to our enemies," he offered.

Sheamus kept thinking of good reasons for additional toasts, and they continued to drink—to Tay O'Shea, king of the Black

O'Sheas, to Parable Plunkett whom Sheamus proclaimed the best medico west of Kansas City, to Close-shave Pelky, Sheriff Sam Odegarde and Dude Mulqueen, and finally to Kate Finucane.

"Katy, the queen of thim all," Sheamus reflected, his voice thick with bourbon and throbbing with sentiment. "The shweetest lady thish side of Killarney, begorrah!"

Blake downed his drink, said nothing.

" 'Tis the puzzle of me life that ye quit Katy like ye did, Jeff," Sheamus declared. "And ye so shweet on her in Dodge City. Though I'm not complainin' about it at all, at all. But I cannot understand why ye did it—and that ye should pass her by so when ye meet her here on the shtreet."

Jeff Blake was as near drunk as he had ever been, and he was feeling more fraternal than he had felt in years, as he sprawled comfortably back on the bed.

"I didn't quit Kate," he said. "She's the one that quit. She ran off while I faced a trio of toughs—didn't even wait to see if I lived or died."

"Oh, she did, did she?" Sheamus demanded.

Blake nodded, and instantly an expression of righteous indignation came to O'Shea's apple-cheeked face.

"Well now, Mishter Blue Blake," he declared wrathfully, "I'll have ye know that Kate Finucane ish not that kind of a colleen!"

Blake shrugged, not seeming to care one way or the other. But O'Shea's ire was fully aroused and resentment goaded him.

" 'Tis a shcandalous lie!" he blurted. "A shameful lie if iver I heard one!"

"What's a lie?" Blake asked, more asleep than awake.

"Now don't ye try to crawl out of it," Sheamus warned. "With me own ears I heard ye say it." He put down his glass and stepped unsteadily toward the bed. "I'll have ye know she's too good for the likes of ye, Jeff Blake!" he declared.

Blake merely looked at him in blank-eyed puzzlement. O'Shea leaned over.

"Shtand up on yer feet and fight, ye lyin' shpalpeen!" he ordered angrily.

"You're drunk," Blake said, and casually waved the Irishman away, not reckoning with the fact that there was a brimming glass of bourbon in his hand.

The whisky sloshed into O'Shea's rage-reddened face. It brought a bull-toned roar from his throat. Half blinded by the smarting liquid, he struck at Blake, missed, and fell across him on the bed.

BLAKE endeavored to squirm free, but O'Shea's weight pinned him securely. All he could do was turn his head as Sheamus clumsily slugged at him.

"I'll learn ye some proper manners, Mishter Blake!" O'Shea promised. "I'll learn ye to reshpect Kate Finucane, who saved yer bacon that night in Dodge City."

"What did she have to do with it?"

Sheamus O'Shea stared down at him.

"Be ye actin' cute," he demanded, "or don't ye know?"

"Know what?" Blake asked.

Sheamus sighed. He lowered his ponderous right fist and removed his left arm from Blake's chest. He eased off the bed and stood unsteadily while Blake sat up.

"So ye never knew it was Kate who sent Ed Masterson runnin' to shtand beside ye that night in the Alamo," he said then in a voice gone mild and mellow.

Blake shook his head. For a long moment, while comprehension seeped slowly through his whisky-fogged mind, Blake stared at O'Shea in squinty-eyed silence.

"Are you shore, Sheamus?" he finally asked.

"Shure and I'm shure," O'Shea told him. Then remembering how Kate had run to fetch Blake this afternoon, he added: "Just like she sent you to side me."

"I feel lower than snake sign in a wheel rut," Jeff Blake said softly.

"Aw, come now," Sheamus consoled. " 'Tis me that should feel like a shnake, misjudgin' ye so and tryin' to court Kate meself." He picked up the bottle and joined Blake on the bed. "Let's me and you get drunk," he suggested.

But Jeff Blake shook his head.

"I've got some delayed courtin' to do," he said. And he did.

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Who was Joaquin Murrieta and how do you pronounce his name?—J. C. L. (N. H.).

A.—According to California legend and tradition, Joaquin Murrieta (Whah-KEEN Moo-ree-AY-tah) was a young *Californio* of Spanish blood, driven into outlawry by *gringo* injustices, who became a great and romantic bandit of the Robin Hood type. More factual reports indicate that he was a cowthief and stage robber.

Q.—How are cowboy saddles of today different from the saddles of around 50 years ago?—N. W. W. (Chicago).

A.—So you want me to write a book, huh? Briefly, modern saddles run to flatter seats, lower cantles and shorter, flat-topped horns of Mexican "dinner plate" rather than "turkey neck" type. Square skirts have given way to a trimmer, rounded style. Because of wide, low withers on quarter horses, many modern saddle trees are built with a wider fork. Bucking rolls and form-fitter styles, designed to make it easier to stay on a bucker, have yielded to a very open type of saddle easy to get out of quickly when roping.

Q.—I read so much about Quarter Horses these days. Aren't there any other breeds used as cowhorses?—O. C. (Mich.).

A.—Yes, Morgans, Arabians, Appaloosas, American Saddle Horses, some Thoroughbreds and Tennessee Walking Horses, and a heap of just plain horses.

Q.—To become a U. S. Forest Ranger, would I have to be skilled as a cowboy?—Tip (Pa.).

A.—No, but you would have to be split up the middle far enough to straddle a horse. Some of most Forest Rangers' duties take them where jeeps can't go and it's too far to walk.

Q.—Is cattleguard another name for a cowboy?—F. X. T. (N. Y.).

A.—No. Cattleguards are livestock barriers where fences intersect a road or highway. Spaced poles, rails or pipes are installed over a shallow pit across the road to form sort of an "open toe" bridge, across which cars can roll but cattle and horses cannot walk.

Q.—I notice that the football squad of the University of New Mexico is called "the Lobos." What does this name mean?—H. R. (Okla.).

A.—"Lobo" (both o's long) is Spanish for "wolf."

Q.—Is there anywhere in the West where U. S. Mail is still carried on horseback?—M. K. (N. J.).

A.—Yes. My own mail comes 14 miles by horseback whenever the road is too muddy or snowbound for the carrier's pick-up to travel. There are dozens of similar situations in the mountain country.

Q.—I understand there are several liquid branding fluids on the market. To what extent have these taken the place of burning?—O. J. F. (Miss.).

A.—I can't tell you exactly, but I know that the majority of cattle ranchers still use hot iron.

Q.—How big, actually, is Texas?

A.—Some think it's too big for its britches, but that is debatable. Its total area is 263,644 square miles, which is 144,000 square miles bigger than England, Scotland and Wales put together. It measures 825 miles from north to south, 740 miles from east to west.

—S. Omar Barker

GUN JOURNEY

Alec was the tame one among the Farrells—but he showed plenty of fight when a gun-running scheme involved his twin brother and menaced Army men!

CHAPTER I

Military Secret

WAR HAD come, and the spring of 1846 was a time to bring out the good in men—or the bad. Word had raced across sparsely settled Texas, newest member of the Union, that Mexican forces under Arista had crossed the Rio Grande and wiped out a detail of United States dragoons.

It was a far cry from that bloody field to the bustling but peaceful prairie port of Independence, Missouri, but a wave of indignation rose. Voices clamored for revenge. Drums rolled, trumpets sounded, volunteers drilled in the streets. Supplies were most urgently needed, as were arms and ammunition.

Alec Farrell was as much stirred by the excitement as any man. He was young and fit, able to march and shoulder a rifle. His courage and patriotism had never been questioned. But Alec was one who stayed behind with the too old and the too young, when the troops marched westward. Alec was office-man for Farrell & Sons, Freighters, and the firm, operating a hundred and forty wagons, was hauling military supplies. Alec was needed more in Independence as a clerk than at Santa Fe or in Texas as a soldier.

"You stay on till you find a man to take your place," old Hank Farrell had told him. "Me and your brothers'll do what fightin's to be done."

His older brother, Reb, and his twin, Bart, had grinned at that. Old Hank and those two boys were known along the freighting trails as the Wild Farrells. Alec was considered the tame one.

"Trouble with you," Bart often told him maliciously, "you got eddication. A hombre with book learning don't belong out where the guns are popping."

"I'll find somebody to take my place here," Alec had retorted.

He was still trying to find somebody who could keep a freight firm's accounts, keep track of freight, and boss a wagon-yard. And the news from Texas and New

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TO HELL

A Novelet by

JOSEPH CHADWICK

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Mexico grew more and more exciting. . . .

It was raining drearily, and Jeb Russell, the firm's hostler, stepped into the office, dripping water. He was a gray bearded old-timer, and he'd been with Farrell & Sons so long that the Farrell boys called him "uncle" and almost considered him a relative.

"Bad night," he grumbled. "Hard on my rheumatism. You're workin' late, Alec."

"Busy, Uncle Jeb," Alec said. He was perched on his high bookkeeper's stool, writing in a ledger. "We're swamped with freight, and there's more coming upriver every day. You holding those two wagons back like I asked?"

"Sure am, son. But it's a fool thing to do, when every last wagon's needed on the trail. What you up to, anyway?"

"Orders from the Army, Jeb," Alec told him. "Some special freight is coming through, and we've got to be ready to pick it up at a moment's notice."

JEB showed signs of interest. "What kind of special freight?" he asked, with an old man's curiosity. "You know, Alec?"

"I know. But I've orders not to talk."

"Military secret, eh?" Jeb gave a chuckle, and turned to depart. At the door, he paused. "I plumb forgot what I came here to say. Alec, you know Bart's in town?"

Alec gave a start. "Bart? He can't be. He left with a wagon train a week ago, heading for New Mexico. You must be mistaken, Uncle Jeb."

"Ain't mistaken," the old man said touchily. "I know what I see with my own eyes. Bart Farrell's in town. Looks to me like he's running wild again. He was down in Larabee's Saloon, last night, drinking red-eye and cutting capers with a dancehall girl."

"You tell him I want to see him, Jeb."

"Sure, Alec. But you be careful how you talk to him. That twin of yours is a bad hombre when he gets riled up."

"I'll handle him," Alec muttered. "Send him here."

He turned back to his ledger as the door closed behind Old Jeb, but now he couldn't keep his mind on his work. If the old man was right, then Bart had walked off the job and deserted the wagon train he'd been ordered to take over the Santa Fe Trail.

There were thirty wagons in the caravan, and they were carrying supplies to General Kearny's Army. The wagons would get through with Bart, of course, but that didn't alter the fact that a wagonmaster had shirked his responsibilities.

Alec got off the stool and started pacing the floor. He took pride in the firm's reputation for being the most reliable freighting concern out of Independence. Old Hank did, too. And Reb. But Bart just didn't give a hoot for anything, and it wouldn't matter much to him if his desertion caused something to happen to the wagon train—something that might give Farrell & Sons a black eye.

Folks said that Alec and Bart were as much alike as two peas in a pod. But that wasn't true. They merely looked alike. They were worlds apart in thought and talk and action. The reason perhaps was Alec's education. Old Hank and Red and Bart were handicapped in one way—none had seen the inside of a school.

Hank Farrell, when the boys were young, had said that at least one was going to have book learning. For some unexplained reason, he had picked Alec, shipped him off to a school in St. Louis. It had changed Alec's whole life. Now, as he waited to put Bart on the carpet, he wished it had been Bart who had been given the steadying influence of an education.

Secretly, Alec resented the unshakable fact that learning narrowed down a man's life. It confined him to a grubby office, chained him to a desk, while other men roamed plains and mountains with a wonderful freedom. Secretly, too, Alec had always envied Bart. His twin was forever mocking him with tales of rowdy pleasure. Bart had been to Santa Fe, that Mecca of all freighters, half a dozen

times before hostilities had ended the New Mexican trade. Each time he returned with highly colored stories of roistering in that far-off city.

"The senoritas, Alec," Bart would say. "A man can have his pick. Next time, I'll kiss one for you!"

Yes, Alec envied Bart his way of life. Now he must give him a dressing down, try to tell him that his rowdy ways were all wrong. Alec almost hated to see Bart come. He was hoping that Old Jeb had been wrong, that Bart wasn't in town, when the door was suddenly thrown open.

"Hiya, partner!" Bart yelled. "You hankering to see me?"

Bart was a little drunk and he had a doll-faced dancehall girl hanging onto his arm. The two of them were laughing. They shook the rain from their clothes. Bart slammed the door, picked the girl up, as though she were featherlight, and set her on a writing table.

"Take it easy, honey, while I see what brother wants," he said.

He was in a good humor, but Bart Farrell could get into a fighting mood as quickly as the spark of a flint could touch off gunpowder. He was defiant when he faced Alec, even though he was grinning.

All the Farrells were big men, and the twins topped six feet. Wide of shoulder, narrow hipped, they were muscular and lean. Both were yellow-haired, gray-eyed. But the rowdy Bart, in broad plainsman's hat and buckskin jacket, was ruddy-dark of skin from living outdoors. Alec, in his townman's neat clothes, was pale beside him. Bart's eyes flashed like those of a small boy up to some mischief, and his smile was that of a reckless man. Alec was almost solemn.

"Talk up, dude," Bart said. "I'm a-listenin'!"

"Send the girl away, Bart."

"Why? What's wrong with Rita?"

"No need for an outsider to hear what I've got to say."

"No need for you to say it, bucko. I'm not listening to your preaching. Ain't taking no orders. I quit Farrell and Sons."

ALEC was jolted. He couldn't imagine any one of the boys quitting Old Hank.

"You quit to join the Army?" he said.

"Shucks, no!" Bart said. "None of that soldiering for me. There ain't no money in it. And I'm plumb tired of not having money."

"You're better paid than most wagon bosses, Bart. The trouble is you drink and gamble it away." He almost mentioned that his brother also squandered too much money on girls like this Rita. "Where're you going to earn more than Hank pays you?"

"Hank sure ain't paying me much," Bart said, his temper rising. "He's a miser, caching all he can in the bank. I'll earn more, don't you gamble I won't!"

"Where?" Alec persisted. "Talk up, Bart!"

"Maybe somewhere you won't like. Stace Lambert offered me a deal."

Alec was jolted again. Stace Lambert was a trader with a bad reputation, and he'd become fat rich out of running contraband to the plains Indians. Whisky and guns. There'd been talk that Lambert also dealt with the *Comancheros*—native New Mexicans who trafficked with the bloodthirsty Comanches—not even turning down the profit to be had in buying and holding for ransom the white captives of the tribesmen. There had been a rumor in Independence a month ago that Lambert now was running guns—Yankee-made guns—across the Border to the Mexicans. A bad hombre to tie up with, Lambert.

"You're joshing, Bart!" Alec said.

Bart was grinning again, but only with his lips. His eyes were frosty.

"Wait and see if I am," he said, reaching out to the girl and pulling her from the table where she'd been perched. "Lambert's offered me a deal—not a job. And I'll make more money out of it than Farrell and Sons paid me in the last five years!"

"It's a crooked deal. Lambert's a blackleg."

"Maybe so," Bart retorted, leading the girl to the door. "But it'll go through, with or without me. So I might as well get in on it."

He opened the door, shoved Rita out into the rain. He started out, then faced about. His grin flashed, and that bright look of mischief was in his eyes.

"You figure that special freight you're going to handle for the Army is a secret," he said. "But it ain't. You want to make a bet, bucko? I'll give you odds that that shipment of new-fangled pistols is never delivered by Farrell and Sons."

He laughed boisterously, mockingly, then slammed the door and was gone. Alec was too startled to go after him, as he later knew he should have done. He stood there, shaken to the soul, wondering how Bart had learned about that arms shipment. Alec alone of the Farrells had known about it, in the beginning, and he had been sworn to secrecy.

CHAPTER II

A Warning

ALEC roused himself, ridding his mind of cobwebby thoughts. Like any man who'd taken education seriously, Alec spent too much time in thinking, not enough in doing. It was time to act. Something had to be done about Bart Farrell—and about Stace Lambert. Bart had been fool enough to boast and reveal the threat to the arms shipment, and it hadn't been an empty boast. There would be an attempt to steal the arms shipment.

Alec put on hat and coat, and went out into the rainy dark. The Farrell firm's office, warehouse building and wagon-yard faced the river front.

Directly opposite was an empty pier, but above and below it were other piers where steamboats were moored. Roustabouts were working by torch and candle-lantern light, unloading cargoes. Strawbosses barked orders. Freight wagons were being loaded right from the boats. There was a hustle and bustle that Independence had never known in peacetime. The sinews of war were coming up-river in a steady stream, and they had to be moved on—across plains and rivers, deserts and mountains—to Kearny's army closing in on Santa Fe and to Taylor's forces defending Texas.

Out on the river, unseen in the murky dark, another riverboat hooted its whistle. There was no end to it.

Alec walked on, head bent to the downpour, his boots splashing through mud puddles. He turned into a side street, halted before a boxlike frame building that stood before a bulkier warehouse.

The sign on the small building read: STACE LAMBERT, MERCHANT.

A light showed through the rain-beaded and grimy window. Alec stepped to the door, tried the latch. The door swung open and he stepped into the office. Stace Lambert was seated at a desk. He was a fat wad of a man, so fleshy he seemed to overflow his armchair. He was bald and his naked pate was shiny in the lamplight. He looked up, dark eyes a-glitter and thick lips pursed.

"Howdy, young Farrell," he said, with false heartiness. "To what do I owe the honor of having you visiting me?"

"Let's talk about guns, Lambert."

"Guns?" the trader said, as though he'd never heard of such things. "You interested in guns, Alec?"

"A shipment of them," Alec replied. "A thousand of those new six-shot Colt pistols, Lambert. You know about them, and I know you do, so don't try to look innocent. My brother Bart talked. He's in with you now, though I can't figure out why you need him. You've always hired hardcases to do your dirty work, other times."

LAMBERT'S bulbous face was blank. He made a big thing of lighting a cheroot at the lamp atop the desk. Watching him, Alec wondered how it was that he managed to continue in business. Surely the law knew that he dealt in

contraband with the Indians. It was likely that Lambert crossed the right palms with gold, or had a hold on some influential politician. The fat man sighed heavily.

"Your brother lets his imagination run away with him," he said slowly. "Maybe I do know about those pistols, Alec. But that doesn't say that I'm interested in them."

"They'd make a good haul—for a thief."

"You accusing me, friend?"

"I'm warning you, Lambert!" Alec said hotly. "Once those guns are put ashore, Farrell and Sons will be responsible for them. If they should be stolen, I'll blame you. And for once I'll see that the law does something about you."

"I'm a patient man, friend," Lambert muttered, heaving up from his chair. "But I can take only so much."

"You heard what I said, tinhorn."

"And I'll not forget it, Farrell," Lambert said, his voice rising until it was as shrill as an angry woman's. "Before I'm done, I'll make you eat every blamed word. Now get out of here!"

Alec had to force down a wild impulse to drive his fist into the man's fat face. Bart, in his place, might have done such a thing. But Alec was sensible, and knew that one blow wouldn't keep Stace Lambert from carrying out a crooked scheme. Nor would his warning. Lambert's greed was as great as his notorious appetite for food, which accounted for his great bulk, and no threat would make him give up a deal that promised a big profit. Those Colt pistols would be worth a fortune in his hands.

"I'm going, Lambert," Alec said. "For now."

As he turned to the door, his back felt as broad as a barn door. It would have been an easy target, had Stace Lambert tried to use the single-shot pistol that lay on his desk.

While he walked along the dark street through the rain, Alec fell to thinking again. He could not understand how Stace Lambert had learned of the arms shipment, since the Army had kept it secret, but it was likely that Lambert had friends in high places. What was even less clear was how Lambert had planned to steal the guns.

The weapons would arrive in wooden cases, consigned to Farrell and Sons, and marked as hardware. There would be other cases of the special ammunition for the pistols. A man couldn't pocket and walk off with such loot. Wagons or pack animals would be required.

Unless there were other complications.

Suddenly Alec realized that something tricky, some elaborate plan, was in the making. Lambert would know that the shipment would be closely guarded, and ordinary river front riffraff wouldn't get near it. That was where Bart Farrell entered into Lambert's calculations. In some way, the blackleg was going to use Bart to steal the guns. That was the only possible explanation for taking Bart into the deal. Bart was a blind fool!

Alec rarely was profane, but now he muttered an angry oath.

Somehow he had to keep Bart from going through with it. He would have to accomplish that on his own. He could not turn his own brother over to the military authorities.

What about Lambert? Alec asked himself. The answer was "no." Stace Lambert would deny everything, and he had a way of covering up his crooked schemes. Alec knew that it was up to him, and he was no more than an office clerk!

He swore again as he plodded along. He knew that if he meddled, he would be in danger. Lambert was playing for high stakes. From what little Alec knew about the new Colts, they were better than the familiar smooth-bore single-shot pistol carried by all but a very few of the men who went armed.

An army officer, a Lieutenant Ashley, had showed Alec a Colt pistol, after asking the Farrel firm to freight the shipment to the Texas border where General Taylor's troops were badly in need of arms. Ashley had bought his pistol from a gun-maker named Samuel Colt, who had traveled to Florida to get the Ameri-

can Army forces operating there in the jungle to buy his weapons. A few other officers had purchased such pistols.

THE Colt Ashley owned fired five shots, from a revolving cylinder, without reloading. The pistols in the expected shipment fired six. They weighed four and a half pounds each, had a nine-inch barrel. Of .44 caliber, they fired a bullet weighing 220 grains and 50 grains of black powder. Ashley had claimed them to be as effective as a rifle at a hundred yards and superior to a musket at two hundred. General Taylor, assigned to defend Texas, had sent Major Sam Walker East to buy the pistols and find recruits. Colt had manufactured the guns at Whitneyville, Connecticut.

Such fine weapons might mean the difference between victory and defeat to Taylor's forces. To Lambert, they could mean a small fortune. By smuggling them into Mexico, Lambert could get his own price in Mexican silver. A thousand pistols at perhaps fifty or a hundred dollars. Alec's mind reeled as he calculated the amount.

"Blast him!" he muttered.

He was as bitter about Bart as about Stace Lambert. Without Bart Farrell, the blackleg couldn't attempt to steal the guns!

A riverboat's whistle wailed, and now the craft's lights could be seen through the darkness. It might be the *Larkspur*, with the arms shipment aboard.

Alec put aside his angry thoughts and headed for the pier nearest Farrell & Sons' buildings. The steamboat, a big stern-wheeler, swung shoreward, losing speed.

It was the *Larkspur*. Alec could make out the name painted on the pilot house.

As the boat eased in, he scanned the faces lining the passenger decks. But not until the pier was bumped and deckhands had jumped ashore with hawsers did he see Lieutenant Jason Ashley.

Like Alec, the officer was young—in his early twenties. He was a dark man, handsome in his blue uniform. He was an officer in the small regular Army, and he had been down-river to St. Louis to take charge of the arms shipment. Excitement built up in Alec as he realized that Ashley's presence aboard the *Larkspur* meant that the guns had come through.

Ashley waved, then smiled at the passenger nearest him. Alec's gaze followed the officer, and turned into a stare. The other passenger was a young woman, and even in the poor light Alec knew she was beautiful. To save his life, he couldn't have made out the color of her eyes or told if her hair was dark brown or black. He sensed rather than saw that she was the loveliest girl ever to disembark here.

Before, when Ashley had been in Independence, Alec had envied him his soldier's life. Now he envied him for having such a companion. Ashley offered the girl his arm, and she took it smilingly. With the other passengers, some of whom wore dragoon uniforms, Ashley and the girl moved toward the stairway to the cargo deck. A moment later, they were on the pier. Alec removed his hat, smiled, and tried not to stare at the girl.

After shaking hands, Ashley introduced him to her. Her name was Nora Weyland. She gave Alec her slim gloved hand that felt fragile and soft in his big fist.

"Lieutenant Ashley has been telling me about you, Mr. Farrell," she said, and smiled. "He thinks well of you." Her voice was low and musical. Alec could see now that she had brown eyes flecked with gold—smiling, friendly eyes. "But then," she went on, "I've heard of the Wild Farrells."

"You have?" Alec said, surprised. "But how?"

"I've lived in Texas for the last two years, where my father owns a ranch," the girl told him. "Farrell and Sons freighted supplies down to the ranch when we first settled there. I met a big handsome man—Reb Farrell, I think."

"My older brother," Alec said. He felt relieved. Had it been Bart, this lovely girl would have been courted with great zest. "But I'm not one of the Wild Farrells, Miss Weyland," he went on, rather

glumly. "I'm the tame one."

They laughed over that, Ashley joining in. Then the officer turned. A sergeant of dragoons had approached them and was saluting.

"What are your orders, sir?" the sergeant asked.

"Oh, yes, Burke," Ashley said. "This is Mr. Alec Farrell, of the freighting firm of Farrell and Sons. You will take orders from Mr. Farrell as well as from me, from now on, Sergeant. He will have wagons brought and supervise the loading of—of our cargo. You will place your men on alert, as sentries. They are to permit no one to lay hand to the cases which are marked with the name Farrell and Sons."

HE PAUSED, glancing about. Alec saw that the sergeant already had placed two of his men on the pier. Others were on guard aboard the stern-wheeler. There were six dragoons, and each was armed with carbine and pistol.

"I'll return shortly, Burke," Ashley said. "In the meantime, keep your eyes open. If there should be any attempt to steal the freight, you have orders to shoot to kill. That's all."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. He saluted and turned away.

Ashley turned back to Alec and the girl. It seemed to Alec that Nora Weyland watched the officer with interested eyes.

"We can take no chances, Farrell," Ashley said gravely. "We've tried to shroud the shipment with secrecy for the simple reason that Major Sam Walker learned that some unknown men have plotted to seize it. An attempt was made at St. Louis, and it failed only because of the escort of dragoons.

"The freight could have been sent by ocean steamboat, down the Atlantic coast, around Florida, and through the Gulf, except that time is pressing. An invasion of Mexico is being prepared, from the sea, and our shipment would have been delayed. The long trip overland was decided by Major Walker, and it's my duty to see that the shipment gets through to General Taylor's command, where it is desperately needed."

"Farrell and Sons will do its best to get the freight through in record time," Alec said. Then he asked: "Will the wagons have an escort?"

"I and the detail will accompany the wagons," Ashley said. His sober mien dissolved as he smiled and glanced at Nora Weyland. "Also we'll be on the alert. We have a precious passenger as well as precious freight. Miss Weyland is returning home from a two-month visit to St. Louis. She has asked me to escort her to her home."

Alec felt a sharp pang of jealousy. He would go back to his gloomy office and his dust-dry account books, while Ashley rode hundreds of romantic and picturesque miles along the Santa Fe Trail and down through Texas in the company of this lovely girl. Some men had all the luck, while to others nothing ever seemed to happen.

Ashley again offered the girl his arm. He was something of a gallant where a lady was concerned.

"I will see Miss Weyland to a hotel, where she'll stay overnight," he said. "I'll return here, immediately."

"You're not starting out until morning?"

"That's right," Ashley said, and led the girl away. She glanced back, smiled.

"Good-night, Mr. Farrell," she said.

Alec scarcely heard her, for his mind was troubled again. By holding over until morning, Ashley was unknowingly giving Stace Lambert and Bart Farrell a chance to get at the arms shipment. Alec frowned. It looked as though the responsibility of the pistols rested upon his shoulders for tonight.

"I'll send the wagons," he called to Sergeant Burke, and his voice was sour.

He strode toward Farrell & Sons, across the street. The rain had stopped, although Alec hadn't noticed until now. His mind was occupied by too many things, and not least of them was Miss Nora Weyland.

Alec wouldn't forget her in a hurry.

CHAPTER III

A Trap Is Sprung

BECAUSE the door was a solid one, and the lower half of the broad window was curtained with a dark green cloth, it was impossible to glance into Farrell & Sons' office. Alec had left the lamp burning, when on his way to pay that useless visit to the fat and crooked Stace Lambert, and he noted vaguely that it still burned.

Had he been able to see into the room, the trap set for him would not have been sprung. A shout would have brought the burly Sergeant Burke and a couple of his dragoons to his aid. As it was, Alec opened the door and, moving fast, was inside before he saw Bart and the other men.

Whirling back to the door he had slammed shut, Alec found his way blocked. A husky river-front hoodlum, with an ugly face scarred by many blows, had placed himself at the door, and was grinning nastily. Another hardcase stood in the center of the room. He was small, wiry, with a pock-pitted skin. Alec's heart pounded. His gaze jumped back to Bart, who was smiling in a devilish way, then to the fourth man—Stace Lambert. The fat man's countenance was wreathed with triumph.

It was Lambert who broke the silence.

"Well, Alec, I've come to make you eat your words."

"You rat!" Alec said. "You thieving rat!"

"Easy, bucko," Bart cautioned. "Easy now—and you won't get hurt."

"To the devil with you!" Alec raged, and, spinning around, leaped at the man by the door.

He got the first blow in, driving his fist into the hoodlum's face and slamming his head against the door. He grabbed hold of the fellow, jerked him bodily off the floor, flung him crashing against a writing table. But the effort threw him off balance, and before he could recover and get to the door, the other desperado had leaped upon his back.

THEY fell together in a thrashing heap, and Alec fought, blind with rage. Throttling hands closed about his throat, and he loosened them by driving his fist time and again into the smaller man's face. He flung the man from him, reared up as far as his knees, then the burly hardcase caught him from behind.

Alec's arms were jerked back, and the man who held him had the strength of a giant. The pock-marked fellow leapt up and drew a knife from inside his vest. The blade came to Alec's throat.

"You son! I ought to slit you from ear to ear!"

"Put down that knife, Casino," Bart ordered. "We've got him, and that's all that matters. Fetch him into the warehouse. Through that door. And peel those dude clothes off him."

"Maybe you better tell your brother, Bart, that you and he are changing places tonight," fat Stace Lambert said, with wry humor. "I'm sure he'll enjoy the little joke, while he's lying tied up back there—and you're supervising the unloading of the Colt pistols from the *Larkspur!*"

They took Alec back into the warehouse, which was piled high with freight awaiting wagons, and ordered him to strip. Casino still held his naked blade ready, despite Bart's order, and he watched Alec with the glittering intensity of a snake about to strike. The burly fellow, who was called Ike, kept behind Alec, and cuffed him when he was slow to obey.

Bart Farrell had come back from the office, and now was removing his buckskin jacket. Lambert remained behind.

"Get a move on, Alec," Bart said impatiently. "You've got no choice."

"You can't get away with it, Bart."

"Why not?"

"Ashley will know. That officer's a shrewd one."

"We'll fool him," Bart said. He was

confident as only a reckless young fool could be. "Get out of your clothes, bucko, before Ike and Casino lose their tempers."

Alec took the hint, for he could see that the two thugs, having felt his fists, were more than willing to rough him up. He stripped down to his flannels, dropping his clothes to the packed-earth floor. Bart picked them up, quickly pulled them on. He seemed a little drunk, but with excitement as well as with whisky.

"A blamed dude," he chuckled. "That's me!"

It was the first time Bart had rigged himself out in townsman's clothes, and it was clear that he was wondering how he looked. Proud of his size and strength, Bart was also vain of his good looks. From hat to boots, the clothes fitted him. He kicked his butternut jeans, buckskin jacket and flannel shirt across to Alec.

"Put 'em on, bucko," he said. "They'll make a man of you."

That stung Alec. Even his own brother thought him less than a man—and with good reason. Alec was blaming himself for having been unable to break out of the trap set for him. A real fighter like Bart—like Old Hank or Reb—wouldn't have been so easily taken.

Silently cursing his failure, Alec pulled on the rougher clothes. When he was rigged out, he realized that Bart was right. There was a chance that Lieutenant Ashley would be fooled. A change of clothes between identical twins would certainly mislead a man who was unaware that Alec Farrell had a twin brother.

Bart was still amused.

"You'll fool folks into thinking you're me, bucko," he told Alec. "But you stay away from my Rita girl. I don't want her to make any mistakes."

Lambert filled the doorway with his bulk.

"Quit the gabbing, Bart," he growled. "Things are happening outside. The two wagons pulled up at the pier, and Ashley's got back. You better show yourself, Bart. If that lieutenant asks any questions, you tell him the wagons belong to Farrell and Sons. You know what to do, once the guns are loaded."

"I'll handle everything," Bart said, sure of himself. He started out through the office, then came back. "I don't want Alec hurt none. If anything should happen to him, I'd sure do some killing."

"You know me better than that, Bart," Lambert said.

"I'm talking to Ike and Casino."

"They take orders from me," the fat man told him. "You've got nothing to worry about. They'll just keep Alec tied up here until everything is safe."

BART nodded, turned away. The street door closed behind him with a bang. Stace Lambert waited a minute or two, making sure that Bart wouldn't come back, then smiled evilly.

"You're going on a little trip, Alec. We can't afford to have you around for a few days. To make sure nobody will ask questions, I'm putting a man in your office tomorrow to look after the Farrell business. He'll tell folks that you left to join the Army." He nodded his massive head. "Take him away, boys—out the back way."

The burly Ike caught Alec by the arms again, held him while Casino lashed his wrists together with a rawhide thong. Alec was forced to walk with them, then, back through the warehouse to the rear door. Casino unbarred it, and Ike shoved Alec outside. They started across the wagon yard.

Old Jeb Russell lived in a little shack at one side of the yard, and as Alec and his guards passed it, they heard the hostler's voice.

"Who's out there?"

"Quiet," Casino hissed, and the point of his knife jabbed at Alec's side. They went silently on, but at the rear of the yard, Alec glanced back and saw old Jeb appear in the shack's doorway. Casino saw him, too.

"If that hombre follows us, I'll knife him sure!" he muttered.

It looked as though Jeb meant to follow. He stepped away from the shack,

yelling something. Alec was afraid for the old-timer.

"I'll send him back," he said.

"Try it, anyway," Casino growled.

"It's Alec, Uncle Jeb," Alec shouted. "Nothing's wrong. You go back to bed."

Jeb halted, mouth agape. Alec was forced on by the two roughs, but he knew that Jeb Russell was suspicious. He would have recognized the clothes as Bart's and the voice as Alec's. It might be that he would do something. But it was a scant hope, and Alec didn't count too much on it.

They avoided the streets, kept to dark alleyways, and finally they were away from the town. Ike led the way, and Casino, at times jabbing Alec with his knife, brought up the rear. They drew close to the river, and Alec could see the black glassy sheen of its surface. For a time, he had the fear that he would be knifed and thrown into the river. But when his guards plodded on and on, his fear diminished. Hoodlums like Casino and Ike wouldn't walk so far to kill a man who was already a helpless victim.

"How long are we to keep him?" Ike finally said.

"Till Lambert sends word."

"Aw, that might be a week—or a month!"

"What d'you care?" Casino retorted. "We're getting paid good."

The river bank became tangled with brush, but there was a footpath. Ahead, some trees loomed. Alec saw a shack.

"This is it," Casino growled. "We're holing up here. You give us any trouble, Farrell, and we'll get rid of you quick. You savvy?"

Alec didn't answer. He was shoved into the shack, and a candle was lighted. There were no bunks, tables or chairs. The only attempt to make the shack habitable had been the placing of some planks on the ground floor, with blankets spread out for beds. But it had been stocked with grub.

Alec saw in a corner slabs of bacon and a big sack of flour. He sank down onto the plank at one side. He couldn't pull the blanket over him, with his hands tied behind his back.

"Cut me loose, Casino."

"Nothin' doin'!"

"Then throw a blanket over me."

"You need a child's nurse, dude?" Casino growled, but he spread a blanket over Alec. "Don't try nothing, during the night. Me, I'm a light sleeper."

Alec turned his face to the wall, not to sleep but to think. His thoughts were bleak. He blamed his own blundering as much as Bart's crookedness, and he knew that both of them would one day feel the wrath of Hank Farrell. It would be hard to face their father, and their brother Reb, after this ugly business was over. The Farrells might be wild when it came to fighting and drinking, but they'd always been proud of their honesty.

MORE than the firm's reputation was at stake. When Alec thought of it, he felt like groaning. Taylor's men on the Border were fighting for their lives, and reports from Texas said that they were outnumbered. Those thousand Colt pistols—weapons far better than rifles or muskets—were desperately needed. In Lambert's hand, they'd never reach Texan troops. Worse, they'd be sold to the enemy—and used against the Americans.

It seemed to Alec that Stace Lambert and Bart Farrell were worse than thieves. They were traitors to their country, because of greed. And he, Alec Farrell, had helped them in their treachery because he wasn't man enough to buck them.

Alec slept finally, but only fitfully.

In the morning, he was cramped and sore from having had his hands tied behind for so long. Casino removed his bonds when the morning meal was cooked. Then, after he'd eaten, the little rough tied his hands in front of him.

Alec was more comfortable that way, but the hours dragged. The waiting seemed as difficult for the two desperados as for Alec, and in the afternoon Casino sent his big partner into town for whisky.

Ike was gone until nearly dark, and came back drunk. Casino cursed him, but

fell silent after taking a drink from the jug Ike had brought. After a second drink, Casino rustled up an evening meal.

It was the whisky that gave Alec his chance.. His hands had been freed so that he could eat, and it was the drunken Ike who replaced the rawhide thong. His fumbling fingers didn't draw the thong tight, and Alec knew at once that he could free himself. He stretched out on his plank, when darkness came, and waited his chance.

CHAPTER IV

The Farrell Blood

ON THE table was a candle which had not been lighted. By the time it was full dark, Casino was almost as drunk as Ike. The two were noisy, first talkative and full of harsh laughter, and then argumentative. They cursed each other, and for a time it looked as though it would end in a brawl.

Alec lay still, so that they would take no heed of him. He gradually worked the rawhide from his wrists. Now! he told himself, and became tense.

Ike sprawled in a corner, dead drunk, but Casino sat crosslegged on his plank and stared dully into space. The little man kept pulling at the jug, and Alec feared that he would never sleep.

It was dark in the shack, but Alec could see Casino's every movement. When the man's head finally drooped, Alec was up and lunging at him. But even when drunk, Casino was as dangerous as a striking snake.

As Alec's hands closed on the man, Casino yanked the knife from his belt and drove it at Alec's throat. Alec stumbled back, losing his hold on Casino. The killer jumped up and came at him. The blade of the knife glinted dully. Alec knocked the man's arm aside, drove his knee into Casino's abdomen. Falling, Casino hit the floor in a sprawl. Before he could gather himself up, Alec kicked the knife from his hand.

There was some of the Farrell wildness in Alec now. He grabbed Casino, lifted him bodily, flung him across the room. The man struck the wall with a sickening thud, then dropped to the floor and lay still. Gasping, Alec whirled to see if Ike was coming at him. The burly thug hadn't even roused from his drunken stupor.

Alec stumbled from the shack, and broke into a run as soon as his boots hit the ground. He headed up-river through the darkness, toward town. His spirits lifted with each running step. With more such luck as he'd had tonight, there was a chance he could find out where Bart Farrell and Stace Lambert were taking the guns. But he had to have luck!

THE riverboat *Larkspur* was already gone from its dock. A string of empty freight wagons was passing Farrell & Sons, headed for some other firm's wagon yard. Alec saw that his office was lighted, and he remembered that the shrewd Stace Lambert had said he intended to place a clerk there to cover up Alec's absence. But on opening the door, Alec found only Jeb Russell inside. The old-timer was slumped in a chair, puffing on his pipe, staring into space. He looked up, gathered his thoughts together with an effort.

"Bart? Alec?" His bewilderment was easily understood.

"I'm Alec, Uncle Jeb," Alec said quickly. "Bart pulled a lowdown trick—took my clothes and palmed himself off on that Army officer, Lieutenant Ashley, as me. Anything happen here since I've been gone?"

"A gent came here this morning and claimed he was filling your place," Old Jeb said. "I been plumb perplexed, Alec. When I saw you with those two renegades last night, I knowed it was you when I heard you talk. Then this morning, I saw Bart dressed in your duds. He was just pulling out with a couple of wagons loaded up with freight off the *Larkspur*. There was some dragoons es-

corting his outfit. What's going on, anyway?"

"Bart's dealing with that fat devil, Stace Lambert."

"That contraband trader? Bart sure must've gone loco!"

"Lambert's after that freight, Jeb," Alec explained. "It's guns and ammunition — the best guns that ever came through Missouri. I've got to get a horse and ride after the wagon train. I don't know how Lambert figures on getting the guns out from under the noses of those dragoons but he's got something planned."

"They've got a whole day's start on you, son."

"I'll ride all night," Alec said. "Jeb, you know the Trail and you've freighted down into Texas. You come along with me."

"Be glad to," old Jeb said. "I've been itching to hit the trail again. But we'll need more'n saddle mounts, once we're headed out. That twin of your'n won't be easy to catch, so we'll have to be able to keep on his trail.

"We'll need a couple pack animals, loaded with supplies. I'll fetch some horses from Briggs' Livery. You can buy grub. And you better be thinking of shooting-irons, pardner. Along with canteens for water. We'll be heading for mighty wild country!"

Alec realized that the old man was right. Bart would give them a merry chase, and they'd have to be prepared for a long time on the trail. After old Jeb had started for the livery barn, Alec headed for Smith & Benton's store. On the way, he passed the blonde dancehall girl who had been with Bart early yesterday evening.

"Bart, what's the rush?" she called after him.

Alec swung around. Before he could speak, Rita came and took his arm. She was a pretty thing, warm and soft looking, but her expression seemed to Alec a bit vacant. He tried to disengage his arm, but she clung more tightly.

"I'm in a hurry, Rita."

"All right, all right," she said, provoked. "But come here first, and give Rita a big hug. Come on, Bart. You like Rita, don't you?"

She was drawing him into a dark doorway, and once there, she pressed against him and tilted her head back. Her red lips were parted and her eyes were almost closed. Alec knew that, thinking him Bart, she wanted him to kiss her. He'd always envied Bart for his way with women, and perhaps it was because of that he grabbed the girl and kissed her hard on the mouth. Rita knew at once.

"You're not Bart!" she cried, her voice rising to shrillness. "You're wearing his clothes, though!" Her expression changed, and Alec was reminded of an angry cat. "What'd you do to Bart?" she said fiercely. "He's been worried about you. He told me. He said he was scared you'd find something out about him. What'd you do to Bart?"

"Quiet!" Alec said.

"I won't be quiet!"

Alec saw men stop and stare at them. He jumped from the doorway and started running. The girl was still screeching, yelling at the men to catch him. He swung around a corner, and kept on going. He couldn't afford to be delayed by a hysterical woman.

By the time he reached Smith & Benton's, he was thinking of that kiss. It made him think of the girl he had met the night before—Nora Weyland. It had been nice to kiss Rita, but Alec wished it had been the other girl. Only then did he remember that he would see Miss Weyland again—when and if he caught up with Bart.

ALEC and Jeb Russell left Independence at midnight. Before noon of the next day, they had reached Round Grove, thirty-five miles distant. A detachment of Missouri volunteers, Santa Fe bound, was bivouaced there. A slow-moving wagon train was passing. Alec talked to the caravan's wagon boss, a man named Hanley who once had worked for Farrell & Sons.

"The Farrell wagons passed me last

night, Alec," Hanley said. "They were traveling light and mighty fast. Bart has two light wagons, and only a mite of freight. Looked to me like he had fresh mules in harness."

"Fresh mules?" Alec said. "Where'd he get them?"

"Along the way, somewhere. There's a trading post about midway between Independence and here."

"He wasn't traveling alone, was he?"

"Nope. There was a dragoon escort with him—and a carriage," Hanley said, probing his memory. "The soldiers were well mounted, as was your brother. There was a woman in the carriage, but a man was handling the team. Something wrong, Alec?"

"Nothing wrong," Alec lied. "But I've got to catch up with Bart."

He swung back to Jeb Russell, who'd gone to question the officer in command of the volunteers. Old Jeb reported that he'd learned nothing at the bivouac, and Alec told him what Hanley had said.

"One thing is certain," Alec ended up. "Bart's in a big hurry. He's traveling faster than any freighting outfit on the Trail. And he'll be able to keep up the pace, if he can get enough changes of mules."

"We'll catch him before he gets to Council Grove," old Jeb prophesied. "That's more'n a hundred'n forty miles. But right now, we've got to rest our hosses —and ourselves."

Alec gave in to that, knowing that they shouldn't risk playing out the horses. He told Jeb they'd rest four hours, then push on again. They rode to a clump of trees, dismounted, off-saddled. Alec watered and grained the animals while Jeb built a fire and cooked up a meal. The old man looked done in. When the grub was ready, he didn't eat much.

"I'll jest smoke my pipe, then get some sleep."

Alec went on eating. He was sure old Jeb had pains in his joints. Eager though the old-timer was, he couldn't hold up. They stretched out in the shade, two men on an adventure they were unfitted to face. One was too old, the other too inexperienced.

What good's my education? Alec asked himself. Outside an office, Bart can make a fool of me.

Pounded by long hours in the saddle, he was so tired his spirits were low. He wasn't sure he could overtake Bart. If he did, what could he do? Alec didn't know. Rowdy Bart would be ready for him. There was no taking one of the wild Farrells by surprise. Sleep finally rid Alec of his depressing thoughts.

They overslept, and six hours instead of four passed before they were in the saddle again. As twilight came, Alec and old Jeb saw the fires of freight caravans off the broad dusty road where a night camp was being made. There was such a camp every few miles. Never in peace had the Trail seen so many wagon trains.

At midnight, another bivouac of troops was passed. Two hours later, a string of empty ox-drawn wagons loomed. Twenty rigs were in the outfit, and they were headed east. No longer was the ancient trace a lonely, dangerous route. It pulsed with life.

The Narrows, Bridge Creek, Big John Spring—each landmark was left behind. Alec lost track of time. He was becoming trail-hardened. Council Grove was next, and Alec and old Jeb were nearly a hundred and fifty miles from Independence. Council Grove was nothing at all except a half-mile wide strip of fine timber by the Neosho River, but it was the jump-off place for the worst part of the Trail.

Alec called a halt, to rest the horses and rustle up a quick meal, and saw how old Jeb left the saddle and sank to the ground.

"I'm done in, pardner," the old man said. "I hate to say it, but I can't keep up with you."

"I can make it alone, Jeb."

"You sure, Alec?"

Sun and wind had turned Alec's face a ruddy hue, and Jeb's doubt of him turned it hard.

"If Bart can keep it up, I can," he said. "You stay here and rest, then head back by easy stages. I shouldn't have made you

come along, Jeb."

"You didn't force me, pardner. I wanted to trail along. And I want to go on, more'n anything. But I'm crowding seventy, and that ain't young."

"You can make it back?"

"Easy."

SO IT was settled. Alec ate some grub, mounted and rode off with one pack animal. He looked back once, and old Jeb waved to him. After that, he looked only ahead. He didn't mind being alone. He could travel faster. . . .

Bart's outfit was always ahead of him. Alec made sure of that by questioning members of the caravans he passed. At Turkey Creek, he came upon a trader with a big drove of Spanish mules. The trader, a man named Hardin, claimed he had bought up the mules in New Mexico and had got out over a back trail. He had a dozen tough looking riders driving the mules, and they'd fought a pitched battle with some Mexican troops at Ojo de Bernal. Asked if he'd seen an outfit of two freight wagons, a carriage, and an escort of dragoons, Hardin nodded.

"The boss of the outfit could've been your brother."

"He is my brother. My twin."

"I traded him fresh mules," Hardin said. "A dozen fresh ones for a dozen run to death. But he paid me ten dollars a head. That wagon train's in a big hurry."

"Too big a hurry," Alec said, and rode on.

He overtook and passed columns of marching men—parts of Kearny's Army of the West. They were volunteers, a rabble rather than a disciplined body of soldiers and, though heavily armed, they had not been given uniforms. But they were in high spirits and sang as they plodded along. General Kearny knew how to march troops; he sent the supply wagons ahead, and for each meal the soldiery had to cover a certain distance. Alec passed many of the supply trains as well as troops, and finally at the Cimarron Crossing, came upon a big bivouac.

It was sundown, and Alec had to halt to rest his horses. He also had to make a decision. Although this was his first trip along the Trail, its route was etched upon his mind as clearly as upon a map. He had heard his father and brothers talk so much of the long trip that it seemed as familiar to him as the streets of Independence. Here at the crossing, the Trail had a fork.

The Army—troops and supply wagons—was following the upper branch, along the Arkansas. It was longer than the Cimarron route, but less dangerous. By taking the lower route, travelers had to cross the dread *Jornada*—the Mexican name for the Cimarron desert.

It was a barren stretch that had taken a terrible toll over the years, in wagons and animals and in men. But the upper route led north into New Mexico, and so long as Lieutenant Ashley and his dragoons were escorting the outfit, Bart would be forced to make a show of heading for Texas. Alec knew that the Cimarron route alone led to Texas and Taylor's Army.

Making his camp, Alec walked to the troop encampment and sought out an officer, a Captain Worden, who, in civilian life, was an Independence lawyer. Worden at first thought Alec was Bart, and was puzzled that Alec should be in his brother's clothes and traveling along the trail alone.

"I figured that was you with that outfit I saw this afternoon," he said. "Was that Bart dressed up in town clothes?"

"Bart's turned dude," Alec said, not wanting to tell of his brother's treachery. "You saw his outfit, eh?"

"Three hours ago, no more."

"Which way was it headed?"

"It crossed the Arkansas."

"Soldiers with it?"

"Some regulars," Worden said. "How is it that outfit's following the Cimarron route? It's dangerous traveling."

"Bart's headed for Texas," was the only explanation Alec made.

He thanked the officer, returned to his camp. He ate a hasty meal, studied his horses anxiously and wondered if he could push them on tonight. The two animals

looked jaded. Alec decided to make a trade. He had some money, and if he threw in enough gold it might help. He went back to the bivouac to see Major Worden.

A half hour later, he was fording the Arkansas. He was mounted on a big bay gelding and a dun mare was carrying his pack. The two new animals were in far better condition than his had been. Bart was only three hours ahead of him, now.

CHAPTER V

Knife in the Dark

DARKNESS overtook Alec before he was out of sight of the Arkansas River. But a moon lifted, three-quarters full and silvery bright. The trail was easily followed, and Alec remembered old Hank Farrell once saying that ever since the rains of '34 there'd been a deep-rutted trace across the desert.

He swung along at an easy lope, and an excitement began building up in him. Days and nights of hard riding had rid him of the habit of too much thinking, and now he did not look ahead and try to imagine what would happen when he came face to face with the Farrell who had turned renegade.

An hour's ride brought him within sight of a campfire's glow. He slowed to a walk, aware that he no longer needed to push himself. The glow ahead grew brighter, separated into four parts, and Alec knew that each fiery segment represented a campfire. Finally he made out the camp—the bulk of two freight wagons, a carriage, horses and mules on a picket line. He rode on until a voice challenged: "Who's there?"

Alec reined in, not wanting to be fired upon.

"A friend," he called. "My name's Farrell. I want to see Lieutenant Ashley."

"You alone, Farrell?"

"That's right."

The voice of the dragoon sentry had aroused the camp, and Alec saw a movement about the fires.

"Come in, mister," the sentry finally called.

Alec obeyed, riding past the sentry. He saw that there was a tent, and he guessed that it must have been pitched for Miss Weyland. Ashley strode forward as he reined in, and the young officer no longer was as dapper as he had been back in Independence.

His face was thinner and dark from the sun, and it needed a razor. Behind Ashley, the other soldiers stood ready with their carbines. Across the camp, by the wagons and picket line, there were half a dozen men not in uniform—the teamsters. Alec did not see Bart.

"Sorry to break in on your sleep, Lieutenant," Alec said, seeing how curiously the officer stared. "But I've been trailing your outfit ever since Independence."

"You're a Farrell?" Ashley broke in. "You look enough like Alec to be his twin."

"Where is my brother?"

"He rode out after we made camp," Ashley replied. "To scout for water. We crossed the Arkansas late in the afternoon, and we haven't seen any water since—not even a mud hole." There was concern in his voice. "If we don't find water, our animals will be in a bad way. We've been pushing them hard, and this is a wild stretch of country. You say you've trailed us. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Plenty wrong."

"Explain yourself, sir."

"Sure," said Alec. "As soon as I've seen my brother."

Ashley frowned with annoyance, then shrugged and turned away. Alec watched him join the burly Sergeant Burke.

After a few words had been exchanged, the dragoons were ordered back to their blankets. Alec counted four dragoons; he remembered that six had arrived on the *Larkspur* with Burke and the lieutenant, so there evidently were two on sentry. Across the camp, the group of teamsters scattered.

SIX of them, Alec thought. Seven, counting Bart. Seven men to handle two light freight wagons and a carriage. Such a thing was suspicious in itself.

At last, dismounting, Alec off-saddled and put his two horses on picket ropes. He spread out his blankets, used his saddle for a pillow. But he didn't sleep, and he wouldn't sleep. He couldn't risk being caught off guard when Bart returned.

He realized that he'd blundered by not telling Lieutenant Ashley why he'd followed the outfit into the *Jornada*. But he had wanted to see Bart first, and give him a chance to back out of his deal with Stace Lambert. Bart and he were brothers, even though they didn't hit it off, and the Farrells had always stuck together. Alec had to try to reason with his twin. If that didn't work, he'd have to talk to Ashley. So he lay there thinking—and was awake when danger came.

It was perhaps an hour after Sergeant Burke changed sentries and that little stir of movement was over. Alec heard a wisp of sound, a rustling over the ground. His horses heard it and shied a little.

Moving only his arm, Alec drew the pistol he had carried holstered at his side all the way from Independence. As a boy, he'd been taught by old Hank Farrell to use firearms. After the horses quieted, the furtive sound came again, beyond the pack gear. Alec could hear a man's quickened breathing.

He waited, tense, until the man crept around the bulky pack. Then he flung aside his blankets and jerked his pistol up. The man lunged at him. Alec, as he cocked his pistol, saw the dull glint of a naked blade. He fired point-blank, and the hit man screamed in eerie echo to the roar of the shot. His body sprawled half atop Alec, who, in panic, heaved it aside and leaped to his feet.

Shouts rang out.

"What's up?" Ashley's voice called.

The dragoons were on their feet, grasping their carbines. Alec was quick to note that over by the freight wagons none of the teamsters stirred. Nora Weyland came from her tent, and drew Alec's gaze as a lodestone might draw a bit of metal. She asked something of Ashley, but he came on without answering.

"What's this, Farrell?"

"This man tried to knife me."

"And you shot him?"

"It was my life or his," Alec said. He did not realize that he was talking as loudly and defiantly as any of the Farrells. "He came here after me. There's the knife—under his hand."

Ashley ordered Burke to bring a light, and when the sergeant came carrying a burning stick from the fire, they gazed at the dead man.

"It's Kraus," Ashley said. "You know him, Farrell?"

"I've seen him around Independence," Alec said. "But I assure you, Lieutenant, there was no reason for me to kill him—except that he attacked me."

"Lieutenant, this man—" Nora Weyland said. She was staring at Alec, her eyes round and wondering. Her tousled hair had coppery tints in the flickering glow of the burning brand. She had wrapped a cloak about herself on leaving her tent, and the hem of her night dress showed beneath it. She looked very beautiful to Alec's eyes—and to Ashley's, also.

"Yes, Nora?" the officer said.

"This man is the one you introduced me to that night we arrived at Independence," the girl said. "He was waiting on the dock, when we left the *Larkspur*. I knew the other man was an impostor. I've been telling you that all along, ever since we left Independence."

Ashley swung around, stared at Alec, and at that moment Burke's torch flickered out.

"Your name?" Ashley demanded.

"Alec Farrell." Alec saw he could no longer keep quiet about Bart. "Miss Weyland is right. The man with you is my twin brother, Bart."

"I knew," Nora said, "by the way you talk."

"All right," Ashley said angrily. "I admit I've been hoodwinked. But what's behind this crazy business? Why did you

have your brother take your place? Why did Kraus try to knife you?"

"It's all part of a scheme to steal the Colt pistols," Alec said. "But I didn't have Bart take my place. He's in on the scheme, I'm sorry to say. The man who planned it had some hoodlums get me out of the way the night the guns arrived on the *Larkspur*, then had Bart pose as me. The man's name is Stace Lambert, and he's shrewd as the devil itself. Kraus must have been one of Lambert's men, for he tried to kill me so I couldn't tell you that you're heading into a trap."

"What sort of a trap?"

"I don't know, exactly. But if Kraus was one of Lambert's men, the rest of those teamsters probably are, too."

"I'll have to take your word for all this," Ashley said stiffly. "When your brother returns, I must place him under military arrest."

"You'd better do something about the others, first."

"Just what, may I ask?"

"Disarm them," Alec said. "Can't you see that when the trap is sprung, those men will be at your back? If you have to fight an attack from outside at the same time you're jumped from behind, you and your dragoons won't have a chance. Disarm them now, Ashley, while you have the opportunity."

FOR a long moment Ashley hesitated, caught by indecision, and it was clear to Alec that the lieutenant was less than a dashing officer when confronted with trouble. It was one thing to be the gallant escort, another to take stern measures when necessity required them.

"Lieutenant, you'll have a fight on your hands if you wait until Bart Farrell gets back," Alec prodded him.

Ashley frowned, then nodded. He turned to Burke.

"Take your men and disarm the teamsters," he told the sergeant. "If they refuse to hand over their weapons, use force."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant saluted and turned away.

Alec reloaded his pistol and stood watching the dragoons crossing the camp. There were five teamsters, now that Kraus was dead, and they had been feigning sleep ever since Alec's shot had roused the rest of the camp.

Sergeant Burke knew his business. He placed two of his men to cover the teamsters with cocked carbines, while he leveled his pistol. The other two dragoons roused the men, who came grumblingly from their blankets. Pistols, rifles, knives—it was as Alec had suspected. Each man had been heavily armed.

"That takes care of them," Ashley said, relieved, and strode over to his dragoons. Alec turned to Nora Weyland, who was watching with great interest.

"You have sharp eyes, Miss Weyland."

"I knew something was wrong the morning we started out," the girl said. "The man who left Independence with us looked like you, and he was dressed as you had been the night before. But he didn't talk or act like you."

"Bart is a little rough."

"And rather fancies himself a ladies' man."

"He annoyed you, Miss Weyland?"

"He amused me," Nora said, laughing a little. "He was attentive to me right from the start. But his lovemaking is rather crude."

"Bart has never known a real lady, I'm afraid," Alec said. "I think nothing more will happen tonight to disturb your sleep. If there is more trouble, I'll try to see that nothing happens to you."

She gazed at him with increased interest.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll sleep easier, knowing that I have a gallant protector. Good night."

She turned to her tent, and Alec felt his face grow warm. He knew that she had been laughing at him. He had seen amusement in her eyes.

After the dragoons carried the teamsters' weapons to their side of the camp and buried Kraus, the camp quieted down. Alec again stretched out on his blankets, not to sleep but to wait for Bart.

Now that he had exposed his brother's

part in the scheme to steal the Colt pistols, Alec hated to face him. He could not blame Bart too much. In a way, Bart wasn't quite grown up. He was almost boyish in his belief that the world was his for the taking, and he'd been tempted by whatever offer Stace Lambert had made him. There was still a chance that Bart could be made to see reason, Alec decided, and even some way to keep him from being placed under arrest.

Alec heard the sounds of a rider even before one of the sentries called out his challenge. Leaving his blankets, Alec slipped from the camp. As Bart rode by the sentry, Alec caught hold of his horse's bridle and brought the animal to a halt.

"All right, Bart," he said grimly. "This is the end of it."

For once in his life, Bart was so surprised he couldn't say anything but merely stared at Alec who he thought was back in Independence.

CHAPTER VI

Fight Against Odds

WITH one hand, Alec grabbed the pistol from his brother's holster, as with the other, he jerked the carbine from his saddle scabbard.

"Ashley knows about you, Bart," he said. "We've disarmed your tough crew, and I had to kill Kraus. Ashley means to place you under arrest, but you can save yourself by telling where and how the trap is to be sprung. Hang it, Bart, you've got to quit this dirty game."

"I quit two hours ago, Alec," Bart said, and his voice was dull. "Stace Lambert sure fooled me. He claimed we'd sell the pistols down along the Border—to Texans. But that wasn't his idea at all. He'd sold those guns long ago, and all he had to do was deliver and collect his money—fifty thousand dollars. But the dirty son was dealing with the enemy, not Texans."

"I told you that, back in Independence."

"I know, but I believed Lambert," Bart said sourly. "He promised me five thousand dollars, gold. And I was fool enough to take the bait."

Ashley came up, followed by Burke.

"You've disarmed him?" the lieutenant said. "Good. Bart, consider yourself under arrest. Where's Tobias?"

"Out yonder," Bart said, "dealing with some Mexicans and renegade Texans. There's a big outfit camped on the Cimarron."

"Who's Tobias?" Alec asked.

"Miss Weyland's driver," Ashley said. "He rode out tonight with Bart—supposedly to find water."

Alec ignored that. He was watching Bart. "Who is Tobias, Bart?"

"Stace Lambert."

"So he came along with you, calling himself Tobias?"

"That's right," Bart said, still speaking in that flat tone. "He came along to see that his scheme worked out—and to collect his money." He looked at the officer. "You better pull out of here, Ashley. Lambert is planning to have those Mexicans and renegades attack you. He stayed behind so his fat carcass wouldn't be in the line of fire when the shooting started.

"Lambert even sent me back to tell you he'd found a waterhole, not knowing that I'd changed my mind about going through with the deal. He figures I'll lead you into an ambush and that the teamsters and I will jump your dragoons from behind."

"When and where is the ambush to be?"

"Right after sunup, at a waterhole about three miles from here."

A FROWN darkened Ashley's face, and Alec could see the man was worried and confused.

"We'll have to turn back," Ashley finally said.

"You'll never make it back to the Arkansas," Bart said. "We're in the middle of the *Jornada,* and the animals haven't had water since yesterday afternoon. When the sun comes up, horses and mules will die like flies, unless they get water soon. We'll have to have water, too, else

we'll be goners. Your only chance is to get to that waterhole first—before Lambert's outfit gets there."

"Do we have time?"

"If we move out now," Bart said. "Lambert met with the Mexican leader about eight miles west of here. They'll be on their way now to the camp by the Cimarron. So we've got time."

"What do you think, Alec?" Ashley asked.

"Bart's right, if your animals are worn out."

"They are worn out," Ashley admitted. "This desert is bad on them."

"Then let's break camp and head for water," Alec said. "I've got a canteen of water with my pack. Water one of your horses, Ashley, and send a dragoon back to the Crossing for help. We'll hold out at the waterhole, as best we can, until your rider brings aid."

Once again the camp was aroused. A dragoon was given Alec's canteen, ordered to water his mount and ride back across the *Jornada* to find help. Mules were harnessed to the wagons, horses to Nora Weyland's carriage. Dragoons saddled up. Bart Farrell gave the teamsters a talking to, warning them that they'd be shot down if they tried any treachery.

Alec saw that the mules and horses were in poor condition, but the animals seemed to scent water once they were on the move and so went forward without much urging. Alec haltered his horses at the rear of Nora's carriage, and because she now lacked a driver, he climbed in and took the reins. "I wish you weren't with us, Miss Weyland," he said.

"That's not very flattering."

"I mean because of the danger."

"But you've promised to protect me!"

Alec said nothing more. He knew she was teasing him.

Once at the waterhole, the animals were watered and Ashley, after asking Alec's opinion, decided to fort up there. The hole was surrounded by a natural barrier of rocks, so that in a fight there would be plenty of shelter.

"Lambert may call it off," Ashley said, "once he realizes we're forewarned and ready."

But Lambert didn't call it off. As the sun lifted, a big band of riders appeared. Alec counted sixty men in the bunch, a dozen of them renegade Texans and the others Mexicans. All were heavily armed. Alec saw fat Stace Lambert riding at the rear, beside a Mexican in a gaudy blue uniform. The riders halted beyond rifle range, and confusion swept them. They had seen the wagons at the waterhole.

"Ashley, we'll never hold out with what arms we've got," Alec said. "Break out the Colt pistols, and we'll give those hombres the surprise of their lives. It's our only chance!"

"You think they'll attack?"

"I know it," Alec said. "Bart, fetch a case of those pistols."

Alec did not realize that it was he who was doing the thinking, giving the orders, taking command. Others noticed it, however, for both Bart and the girl eyed him with sudden respect, and Ashley seemed relieved to share the responsibility.

A case of guns was brought from one wagon, a case of ammunition from the other, and both were broken open. There were twenty of the Colt pistols in the case.

Alec turned to Ashley again. "Have your men take pieces of harness and tie up those teamsters, Lieutenant. We don't want them loose when the attack comes. We'll be quite busy enough."

He was right. When the attack came they were busy enough. At Stace Lambert's urging, the Mexican officer sent the motley band charging against the waterhole. Riding like Comanches they came, shooting their guns, yelling wildly. The few defenders—Ashley and his six dragoons, Alec and Bart Farrell—held their fire until the attackers were within easy range. Then they opened up a terrific fusillade with the new Colts.

Eight guns, forty-eight shots! It made a shattering volley. Horses screamed and went down, Mexicans and renegades cried out and toppled from saddles. Dust and powdersmoke roiled up, and the din lifted to a wild crescendo.

Alec emptied his first pistol, took up another. By the time he had emptied it, the attack was beaten off. The survivors swung around and fled in panic. They left behind a half dozen dead and wounded horses, a dozen men. Out beyond range, Stace Lambert and the Mexican officer tried to stop the retreat. Finally they managed it.

No second rush came. Wary of those Colt pistols, the attackers took cover behind rocks. They formed a wide circle about the waterhole, and settled down to sniping. One dragoon had been killed in the attack, and one had been slightly wounded. Even one life was a high price to pay, but Alec knew that the defenders had been lucky. The sniping forced them down among the rocks, and the constant shriek of rifle bullets and musket balls tore at their nerves.

TIME dragged. An hour passed, and another. The sun lifted higher, was scorchingly hot. Horses and mules were hit. Some were killed outright but others, wounded, had to be shot by the defenders. When the sun was highest, a second dragoon was killed. He'd exposed himself to fire at a sniper. Two rifle bullets crashed into him. They'll get us, one by one, Alec thought glumly, and looking around, saw that the others felt the same way.

It was Ashley who finally weakened.

"Our position is hopeless," he said. "We've been under fire nearly five hours. There are times when surrender is justified, and I feel this situation is hopeless. Help will never arrive."

"Forget that, Ashley," Alec said. "If they want the guns, we'll make them pay the price. The Mexicans can't be blamed for wanting them, since they're at war with us, but we can't hand the guns over to be used against our own people."

"We've a woman to consider, Farrell," Ashley said, nodding toward Nora Weyland. "Perhaps you've forgotten that."

"I haven't forgotten Miss Weyland," Alec retorted. "On the contrary, I'm considering her." He lowered his voice so the girl, who was bravely loading pistols, couldn't hear. "We'd be killed even if we give up. Lambert can't afford to leave us alive and go back to tell that he was behind this scheme. And we can't let Miss Weyland fall into the hands of those renegade Texans."

"We'll die here, then," Ashley said.

"You afraid, Lieutenant?"

"I suppose so," Ashley said honestly. "But I'm a soldier." He turned and opened fire at a Mexican sniper.

It went on and on, like an endless nightmare. The attackers' wagons came up in midafternoon, bringing grub and water, but the sniping did not let up. Another dragoon was badly wounded, and Bart Farrell was hit in the left leg. Alec had almost forgotten Bart, and he realized now, as he bandaged his brother's wound, how much Bart had changed. Bart had fought silently, grimly. He was no longer the rowdy, laughing Bart Farrell. Alec, who had a bandage around his own head where a bullet had nicked him, looked at Bart wonderingly.

"I'm going to die here, Alec," Bart told him. "I feel it, somehow. And it's what I deserve. I'm to blame for this. Look, Alec—you promise me something?"

"Sure, Bart."

"Don't ever tell Reb and old Hank about what I've done?"

"I promise," Alec said, and choked up.

Ashley yelled a warning, and Alec leaped to the rocks. A dozen riders were forming to make a rush at the waterhole. The sun was low in the west and so shone brightly in the eyes of the defenders, and it was clear that Lambert and the Mexican officer hoped that would be to their advantage. As the attack came, the snipers all around the besieged waterhole opened fire. "Get the riders!" Alec shouted, and his Colt blasted.

For what seemed an eternity the riders came on, their weapons roaring, but again the Colt fire was too much for them. Four of them went down before they swung away. "Look at that!" Sergeant Burke yelled suddenly. "It's Bart Farrell!"

Alec groaned. Bart had mounted his horse and ridden out, despite his wound.

He was racing wildly after the survivors of the shattered attack, heading toward the wagons, and he had one of the Colt pistols in his hands. Now he swung away from the other riders and opened up with the pistol. Only then Alec realized what he was up to. Bart had ridden straight for Stace Lambert, and now his bullets were driving into the fat man. Lambert fell—and so did Bart. A renegade Texan had shot him from the saddle.

A sudden quiet came. Even the sniping stopped. Bart had guessed right. With Lambert dead, the Mexicans and renegades had no one to command them.

IT WAS at sundown when the attackers withdrew. They pulled out with surprising haste. Then Alec saw what was hurrying them. Riders were coming from the northeast. Ashley's courier had come with help. In the vanguard of the mounted column were two burly men—old Hank Farrell and handsome Reb.

They explained to Alec that they had just arrived at the Cimarron Crossing, on their way back to Missouri with an empty wagon train, when the dragoon had ridden in hell-for-leather from the *Jornada*.

"When we heard some Farrells were out here fighting," old Hank said, "we figured we'd come along to share in the fun. Where's Bart?"

"Mr. Farrell, it is my unpleasant duty to tell you that your son, Bart, is dead," Lieutenant Ashley said.

"He's dead?" old Hank muttered through his shaggy beard.

"Yes, sir. And not only that—"

"Not only that," said a musical voice, "but he died a hero."

Everyone turned to look at Nora Weyland. Her dress was soiled and torn, and her lovely face was smudged with dust.

"Isn't that so, Lieutenant Ashley?" she demanded, giving the officer a meaningful look. "Bart did die a hero, didn't he?"

"Why, yes," Ashley said. "Yes, he did."

"He was grand, Mr. Farrell," Nora said, her face aglow. And your other son, Alec, has been wonderful, too."

"Ma'am, I don't know who you are or what you're doing out here on the *Jornada* with my two boys," old Hank grumbled. It was clear that he was trying to conceal his grief. "But I can see you're no cheap floss out of a dancehall. So you must be Alec's girl, eh?"

Nora's cheeks colored.

"I'm nobody's girl, Mr. Farrell," Nora said. "But if Alec keeps on staring at me I'll begin to believe that—well, that he has designs on me. Do you think he'd escort me to the Weyland Ranch, Mr. Farrell?"

"By durn, I'll see that he does."

Nora turned to Alec, smiling.

"You won't mind, Alec?" she asked.

Alec certainly wouldn't mind, but he had trouble saying so. When he looked into Nora Weyland's eyes, he could do nothing more than stare. Even old Hank finally noticed it.

"Alec, what the devil you still doin' in Bart's clothes?" the old-timer roared.

Alec didn't hear a word he said.

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By CY KEES

"Like a crippled Injun afoot in a buffalo stampede!" she yelled

Dink Heath forsakes cows and turns hog wrassler for sentimental reasons!

HOG WIDOW'S SECRET

MAYBE you've never rassled a hog or tried to drive him in a place his one-rut mind says he isn't going to go. If you haven't, you're just like me the night I staked my claim for the honor of taking care of the Widow Nelsfeffer's hogs. Yeah, I said honor.

She needed three men and she got a good turnout in the old dance hall. Right then something hit me, and I wanted that job bad. For the first time in fifty odd years, I fell hard. And stranger or not, I figured on giving the local boys a run.

Not that the Widow was too much to look at on the surface. Her skin was a little leathery, and I judged she weighed close to 195. She wasn't very tall and had a lot of heft in the shoulders. But you just got one look at her little black eyes and right away you figured here was a woman you could always look to for help and kindliness. We lined up and she began

asking questions to find out who was the trail-wise hog men.

I had a scared feeling because I'd never gone close to hogs in my life when I could find half an excuse to circle them. But that's what love does to you. I stayed there, and remembering my mannerables, I took off my hat.

THE RANNIE ahead of me got to the front, and I wanted to bolt and run. He told how he'd once corked a razorback in the head that was rootin' the spudpatch. Poor Widow Nelsfeffer looked sad.

"Unlimber your hocks outta here," she said, in a kind of flat, but patient voice. "If there's one thing I can't stomach, it's meanness to my hawgs."

That gave me a good idea. I'd tell her there was no friend like a hog, and all my sentiments turned right towards them. But somehow when I was looking into those little black eyes, I just couldn't get my adam's apple unjuggled.

"Well, spit it out, stranger," the Widow warbled, and I knew she was tryin' to put me at ease. "What's the matter—got a half-hitch in your tongue?"

My face was burning like a prairie fire and all the words I wanted to say bottled right up behind my mouth. She chortled, gentle like.

"Well blast my eyeballs! If you can't do anything else, give us a couple of hog-calls."

The words were still all damned up behind my mouth. I opened up to tell her I couldn't, and there came bustin' out a loud croak like a bloated bullfrog's.

"Not bad," she crooned after the uproar died down. "Ain't got the tune quite right, but no matter. I don't like the braggin' breed of men anyhow. They prattle a lot but never deliver the herd." She shifted in her chair, and one of the arms broke off. "What's the handle you go by?"

"Dink Heath," I mumbled, not daring to hope that she'd take me.

"Dink," she repeated, and if I'm not mistaken, she had to fight back a tear. "Had a prize boar named Dink onct. Up and died of the dry heaves, poor thing."

I muttered my condolences, and the Widow waved the chair arm at two gloating waddies. "Meet your sidekicks," she said. "Two-bits and Pete Jarveson. Shake breadhooks there—don't need to sniff at each other like strange dogs."

Two-bits smiled real friendly and looked close at me. When he stepped back the Widow leaned over.

"He's a mite near-sighted in the eyes," she told me in a husky whisper that made my heart stampede. "Act like you ain't caught on. He's so blamed touchy about it."

Pete Jarveson didn't offer to shake. He just sneered and said I could consider him chief he-boss out at the hog farm. He had a greasy face and green eyes that never looked at you both at the same time.

"Be rarin' to rumble at five in the morning," the Widow said. "There's lots of hogs to slop."

I started to tell her that five in the morning is when I'm getting my second wind in the bunk department. But she looked at me kind of odd, and I figured I'd wait a couple of days when we'd be better acquainted. When you're in love for the first time, you don't take unnecessary chances.

I staggered out the next morning and Two-bits was already busy cleaning out one of the hog barns. He had a long-handled pitchfork and couldn't seem to get his sights lined on the hole in the side. He pointed out the window at a big hulk of a hog lumbering by.

"My eyes ain't as good as they used to be," he admitted. "But I think that's Roscoe, the number one boar on the spread."

If they make them any bigger and meaner looking, I don't want them trotted out. This one was as big as a trapwagon with ugly-looking red eyes. He had a sour look on his face like he'd drunk a jug of vinegar that didn't set right. Just then he rumbled a couple of deep-belchin' grunts, and I knew I'd sized it up right.

Two-bits was glancing around in a nervous way, and I guessed he was worried about Jarveson. He started pitching again, and I stood there making bets with my-

self, three to one against whether he'd hit the hole.

I broke even until Pete Jarveson busted in and demanded to know where I'd been and to get the hell out here and help put the gilts in the pen. I couldn't figure out what he was on the peck about, but I followed him. My game leg was aching again and it was hard going.

Gilts, I found, was just like heifers in the cow line. There was about thirty of them, one looking crabbier than the next, like they'd just been choused out of their bedding grounds. There was a big door open, and I figured you just herded them in like cows.

I was anxious to show I was willing to pull my share of the load. I started yippin' and fannin' the air with my hat. Man did they scatter! In a minute, all you could see of them was pieces of sod flyin' up from behind. I've seen some powerful stampedes, but nothing to compare with the way they took out two sections of rail fence! Pete bristled up, branding-iron hot, his green eyes rolling like a boogery steer's.

"You danged idjit!" he yelped. "You don't know beans about hogs. You got to trap 'em in!"

WELL, I expected him to lay out a dribble of chop feed right in that open door. Instead he began blocking the door with sticks and brush, old troughs and salt blocks. He left a little hole.

I started to tell him he was crazy between the ears, but then the gilts came back, and I waited to let them prove it. They sniffed around that hole, gruntin' deep in their innards. One stuck her ugly head in the hole and made a wild lunge right in.

"Come back here!" Pete yelled at the rest, waving his arms like a madman.

I ran to head him off and shut him up before he ruined the whole show. Then I stopped and couldn't figure it out. Those gilts lunged through the hole in a big parade, into the barn where they're supposed to be.

Pete smirked like a pat-hand bluffer. "You got to make 'em think they're getting in some place where they got no business," he bragged. "Just let 'em think they're doing something ornery, and they'll pull your way every time."

Pete scowled and told me to get busy and do the feeding. He'd forgot himself and was sociable there for a minute. Those orders were fine and dandy with me. I never did mind scattering a little hay, and I figured it'd be about the same except that I'd be giving out chopped feed. I took a gunny sack of feed and started out to the big community feed trough in the middle of the yard. It was all quiet and peaceable until one careless grunt gave the whole alarm.

They came from all sides, heads down and running in a kind of clumsy gallop. They mobbed that trough, and they pushed, grunted, gouged and squalled like nothing you ever heard in your life. I slithered right into the middle of them and they pushed right back, trying to unpin me. I looked for a place to start dumping and every time I started there was five or six of those greedy heads closin' up the space.

I heard a loud laugh and was luckily swiveled around by a big brute of a hog who wanted his feed first. There, by the fence, stood the Widow, busting her knee with her hand—laughing. And Pete right there, talking low out of the side of his face.

That hurt me right down to my riding boots and I up and dumped the feed right over the hogs. That was okay with them. They went right at it, heads down, gougin' and scufflin' for better position.

I fought my way clear of a couple of pressing hams and started for the fence to explain to the Widow how it all came about. I just couldn't have her get the wrong opinion of me right at the start. But when I saw the cute picture she made, kind of hangin' over the fence, I couldn't get a word out.

"Like a crippled Injun afoot in a buffalo stampede!" she yelled. "You got a lot to learn about bein' a hog puncher!"

Pete walked halfway back to the house

with her and my heart twisted and turned like it was about to come apart at the seams. Two-bits sidled up and blinked at me.

"That you, Dink?" he asked.

I must've been getting that hog smell bad, or he could've told me from Pete Jarveson at twice the distance if he was rock blind. Two-bits seemed to be plumb tuckered.

"Don't think the Widow's worth this hog hell," he said, real earnest. "Give me a herd of mad, bawling cows or an outlaw bronc and—"

"You mean," I cut in, surprised, "that you're out here to court the Widow too?"

"Sure," he said. "So's Pete. Why in the blue blazes do you think I'd be here?"

That's a good question and one I should have answered for myself right away. Starting then, it looked bad for my plans for a nice peaceful married life in my old age. Because Pete was blabbering to the Widow, and I knew he wouldn't be saying anything good about me.

I sat down, my leg gnawin' like mad from that hog stampede. It ain't been quite right since that time I fell asleep and Indian Hill tied it to a locoed calf. Drug me over a quarter mile by my leg before they got it stopped. Course Indian meant it all in good fun, but that never did take that two-way kink out of the knee. I was just getting settled nice when Pete came up, glaring.

"Come on," he barked. "We've got some ringing to do."

Now there's something I had the general idea of and I thought here is the place I'm going to shine. It's more like branding, I thought, except you pinch a ring in the hog's nose instead of slapping on a brand. First thing I did was round up a lasso rope. It was a little stiff and weak, but overall serviceable.

I built a loop and went in the shed where we were going to ring those gilts. Pete looked at the rope and got such a look of sick disgust on his face that I knew right away I had the wrong branding iron in the fire.

"You blamed idjit!" he snorted. "Leave the planning to me and throw that away. I've got a system that'll beat a rope every time."

SO SAYING, he picked up a piece of wire with a noose built in one end and a handle on the other. He sidled up to an ugly, suspicious-looking gilt and eased the loop over her snout. Then he pulled it tight. Squealin' and grunting, the gilt hauled back like a stubborn mule. Pete unfurled his big yellow fangs in a grin.

"Hold 'er by the handle," he ordered.

I'd have sooner grabbed a bull by the tail, but I took it.

I figured any minute now that gilt'd get a corkscrew idea to charge and leave me holding the wire. But she didn't. Just pulled back enough to keep the wire tight. You couldn't have pulled her ahead an inch with a team of freighter mules. But her legs weren't built right to pull much backwards, so she stood tight, just the way we wanted her.

Pete came in and clamped a ring in her nose. He looked around skittish when that gilt let out a run of mad-dog squeals.

"The Widow can't stand mistreatment of her animals," he told me. "She's so ladylike and gentle, she just can't stand the cruelty." He sighed and I knew he'd spotted the same qualities in the Widow that I had. I figured right then he was going to be hard to beat out.

We got the ringing done, and right away there was another job before a man could get three seconds rest. I dealt out the slop, watching that Roscoe boar like a hawk. He glared back out of his slit red eyes like he was wondering if I'd make a good dinner. There was no friendly feelings wasted between us from the start. Two-bits came stumbling along, stubbin' his toe on everything that stuck up more than an inch from the ground.

"I'm getting out of here," he moaned, and I saw that something had happened.

I figured I'd better try to cheer him up a little. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Get a whiff of the slop barrel?"

"Just about as bad," he mumbled. "Went down to ask the Widow for a little

lunch, seeing as how my belly's as flat as a pressed cowhide. Through the open door, I see her all splattered out in a chair, snoring like a ripsaw." Two-bits looked around—scared. "She opened her eyes and let out a grunt—just like one of those gilts." Two-bits wiped sweat from his forehead.

"She made a dive for a shotgun she had there, tipping the chair over backwards." He crawled over the fence. "I'm putting on my coat and getting out of here."

Now I guessed it was his bad eyes that made him imagine all that. Either that or he was a little locoed under the horns. One down, one to go, I figured and watched Two-bits veer towards a sow that was feeding a bunch of her young. I should have yelled, but I didn't think, and anyhow the Widow said to pretend I didn't notice about his eyes.

Eyes peeled for his coat hanging five feet away, he stepped right in the middle of that sow's supper table. The sow squealed and there was a flash of teeth. Two-bits yelled and took the fence in one long jump, a big slash in his boot.

"Roscoe on the prod!" he bellered, and the last I saw of him he was piling over the hill, hell bent for election and not waiting to open gates. I watched him till he was out of sight, and he never slacked up once.

"Who's abusin' my hawgs?" came a dangerous sounding voice from behind me, and I whirled. The Widow stood there, in a kind of fighting crouch.

"Two-bits," I said quick. "He didn't wait for his pay. He lit out of here like the devil was behind, twisting his tail."

"Lucky for him," she said so low in her throat it was almost a growl. "I just can't stand anybody that's mean to my hawgs. Can't stomach that nohow."

She went back and the next couple of days my luck seemed to change. I got used to that infernal grunting those hogs do. Seems like a horse'll whicker if he gets near feed, water or a friend. But a hog just keeps lettin' out those belly grunts for such little things as turning his head.

You might think a blatting sheep'll foozle a sheepherder. Well, I say they won't do it half as quick as those hogs would to a hogherder. Not if he had to listen to that gruntin' all the time like a sheepherder has to listen to his sheep blat.

During those days of hard work and dodging Roscoe, I could see I was edging Pete as far as the Widow was concerned. She came out and talked to me now and then, and I tried my best to appear the gentleman. Otherwise she stayed in the house most of the time. It was kind of nestled in a draw about a quarter mile away. She always came out when the wind blew south. She'd come out with her mending and sit in a grove of trees a little to the north of the pens. I asked her about it one day.

She smiled and I thought I saw a faint blush on her cheeks. "There's pretty ripe odorments blowing down from the hawg lots," she told me. "A body has to get upwind before she can draw a decent breath of air."

ALL this time Pete got more cross-eyed than ever with jealousy. Those green eyes of his glittered, and he edged in a kick at one of the hogs now and then to take out his spite. But not when the Widow was around. Then he talked real friendly to them like he was their best pard. But it didn't seem to do him no good as far as she was concerned.

Once in awhile, I thought of what Two-bits said, but I knew it was his eyes that gave him the wrong slant. As kindly as the Widow is towards her hogs, I figured, think how she'll be to her husband. And so pretty too—once you look past the surface.

So early one morning, I made up my mind that the next time the Widow comes up, I'm going to propose. Naturally I was as nervous as a colt, thinking my adam's apple'll start juggling again like it did the night I got the job. But Pete pulled out to the far side of the lots, and it gave me a good chance.

I finished the feeding, all the time watching the house just hoping she'd

come out. Roscoe shambled over, and I headed for the fence, not liking the mean look he was giving me out of his half-closed eyes. But he broke into a ground rumbling run and cut me off. I started sweating a little.

"Time to put on the feed bag," I cooed, trying to get him through his greedy belly. "Got a nice feed of chop just for you."

He stood there, spraddle-legged, head lowered and didn't act like he believed a word I was saying. Maybe he'd caught on to it that once I was over the fence, I'd stand and heckle at him. He bared his teeth in a kind of leer, and there was a murderous gleam in those sleepy red eyes.

"Wait awhile, friend," I pleaded and started backing away. Roscoe let out a couple of wicked snuffles and charged. I froze, not knowing which way to jump. His course was nothing you could predict offhand. Two feet away, he lowered his head like a billy goat.

Somehow I remembered that everybody had always told me I could never corner a hog in an alley on account of my bow-legs, and I opened the loop. That blasted Roscoe made a liar out of every one of them. He did get almost through, but wedged at the hams and kept going, dragging me along. Really feared then, I tried to anchor my bootheels in the ground, but no use. I just left two furrows behind us.

My lame knee was killing me so I threw myself sideways hard. It swagged him off his pins, and he flopped, squealin' like I'd stuck a Bowie knife in him. I got up and made a dive for the fence. But he'd learned his lesson. He sidled away, and I turned and hooted after him. He ambled over towards Pete like he wanted some comforting.

Then I heard the wild screeching from the house and here came the Widow on the dead run, wavin' her arms. Right there I saw the end of all my hopes. I scruffled the dust with the toes of my boots, figuring I might as well face it.

"That dirty lying lizard!" she yelped, looking across the way at Pete. "He's always pretended to be so friendly with Roscoe and now he's torturing the poor thing. Makes me want to shotgun him off the place!"

I saw a glitter of hope then. Seems like she'd misread the sign and got on the wrong trail. If she thought Pete—

"Tell him to get off the place— I hate his polecat guts for pulling a trick like that!" she said. "Tell him to get off and never come back!"

Now on the surface that looked like the easy way out. Get rid of Pete and all

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my competitors would be gone. But somehow I just couldn't fork-tongue the Widow that way. I always figured marriage should start out with everyone on the square and I just couldn't lie to her.

"I'm sad to have to say it," I mumbled. "But I was the one that made Roscoe squaller."

"Oh, you were, eh?" she snarled, and came over the fence in a half dive. "Well, let me tell you something. I never pegged you for a yeller streak like—"

"Look out!" came a scared yell from Pete, and I whirled around, the Widow a couple feet behind me. Head down, building up steam like a loggy freight engine came Roscoe, eager to spill blood. There was my chance.

I could save the gentle Widow from his attack and be right back where I was before. But before I could move, the Widow flailed out ahead of me, right in the path of that charging boar.

She dug in her high heels and stood there waiting, her wide shoulders hunched a little. On Roscoe came, and she stood like a rock. At the last minute, he bluffed out and tried to swerve away from her.

"Oh, no yuh don't!" she yelled and pivoted, ground-staking her heels again. With one big hand, she grabbed his snout —with the other one of his hind legs. Then she gave a big hunch.

Roscoe came off the ground a good two feet and hit with a solid thump. The breath whooshed out of him, and his ugly snout dropped open, gasping for air like a grounded catfish. But he wasn't due to get any. Not with that big knee gouging his middle and shuttin' off the draft.

The Widow gave him a couple of cuffs across the jowls as a warm up. Then she let go of his snout and really started plasterin' the punches in, not caring where they landed so long as they found a solid place. Roscoe squealed and grunted, wheezed and moaned, but to no avail. She gave him a regular Apache workin' over, and finally let him loose.

HE STAGGERED away, mouthing for air like he thought there wasn't anything quite so good. He looked back kind of sour-like, and you could see he didn't want any more cards in that rough a game.

"Now to settle your hash," the Widow snarled, coming towards me. And I wondered what I ever could have seen in her to like.

Two-bits had been right. That mean hook in her nose was built just right to rip out sawmill snores. And the way she used those ham fists, a shotgun would get in her way. I was backing away, and toppled over the fence.

That gave me a safe feeling, and I decided to jeer her a little like I did against Roscoe.

"Thought you was the one that wanted the hogs treated like your pals!" I snapped. "Don't see where you have such kindly feelings towards them."

"Kindly feelings, hah!" she snorted. "I wasn't thinking of their feelings. It's the hog prices that I got my bleepers on. If I ever see you on this place again, you'll get a load of buckshot to show you where my feelings lay! Now get out!"

I got. I looked back halfway up the hill, and Pete was there comforting her. She was glancing at the ground with that shy look. Maybe I should have warned Pete.

But I figured it's like having an ornery mule and an outlaw horse. Might just as well pair them up and have all the cussedness in one team.

COMING NEXT MONTH

TRAITORS' BLOOD IS RED

A Novelet of Six-Gun Intrigue by **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The first known newspaper west of the Mississippi was published at a remote trading post in Arkansas in 1819.

Randolph Scott, the vet Western star, is strictly an Easterner—born and reared in Virginia. He didn't know a spur from a croquet mallet until his late teens and he never saw a Western saddle until he came to Cinemaland after graduating from the University of North Carolina.

In his old age Daniel Boone kept a coffin under his bed and once in awhile tried it to see how it would fit. But in spite of his many brushes with Indians and his hairbreadth escapes, his death was due to indigestion.

The mortal remains of Big Nose George, Rawlins, Wyo., outlaw, have been uncovered in a whisky barrel coffin. The discovery was made by workmen digging an excavation in Rawlins. The barrel contained a number of bones, including a skull with the top sawed off. Big Nose George was George Manuse, alias George Parrott, who in 1880 attempted to derail a Union Pacific train hauling a railroad paycar. The plot was discovered and the outlaws fled to Rattlesnake Canyon. Deputy Sheriff Bob Wooderfield was shot and killed when he came upon the outlaw hideout. Big Nose was captured later and sentenced to be executed. He was taken from the jail by four or five men and lynched. There was no doubt about the remains being those of Big Nose George. A pioneer had kept the top part of the skull—and it matched perfectly with the skull in the barrel.

The modern auto has deprived New Mexico's roadrunner bird of its favorite pastime —racing horses and horse-drawn vehicles down the straight, flat roads of the Western state.

An insurance agent engaged by 20th Century-Fox to write accident policies on the Colorado people hired to work on an on-the-scene Western movie, approached a cowpoke named Misery to get some facts for the routine form.

"Been in any accidents?" the agent asked.

"Nope," said Misery. "No accidents."

Another cowpuncher spoke up, mentioning that Misery had been thrown a few months before by a bronc' and had broken a shoulder.

"Wouldn't you call that an accident?" asked the agent.

"Nope," said Misery. "Weren't no accident. That bronc did it on purpose."

Death came in Boston to William Penniman Miles, 93, who escaped the massacre of Custer's force at the Little Big Horn only because he was transferred a few days before the battle. He was a friend of Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok.

It was the biggest blamed grizzly Slats Dillon had ever set eyes on—and what's more, it ran him off the range with rifle bullets!

LOADED FOR BEAR

by BUD WILKS

THE Cross-in-a-Box was a good outfit, in spite of the way the Old Man was always saying his cowhands acted like a bunch of addle-headed kids who didn't have as much brains as a whiffle tree. Old Lem Carson never did have much of a sense of humor. So when his waddies got to joking and playing tricks on each other, the ranch owner acted plumb disgusted.

Take the time Slats Dillon came

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riding in from the south forty like he had a whole band of Indians after his scalp. His sorrel cowpony was traveling just about as fast as it could go—a speedy gallop. He was yelling something as he reined up in front of the bunkhouse, but he quieted down quick when he saw there wasn't anybody around but old "Beefy" Lang, the ranch cook, sitting on a bench in front of the bunkhouse.

"What's eatin' you, Slats?" Lang asked. "You act like you just robbed a bank and there's a posse on your trail."

"I saw a bear!" cried Dillon. "Biggest blamed grizzly bear I ever set eyes on."

"Huh?" The cook blinked, and stared at the husky little waddy. "I've seen a few bears myself, but never found that a reason to ride a horse to death."

"Aw, I didn't ride my horse so hard," protested Dillon. "He just felt like runnin', so I let him go."

"Thought you were fixin' fence over south today," said Lang. "The Boss ain't goin' to like it a-tall when he hears you come ridin' in just because you spotted a grizzly."

"Bet you wouldn't hang around either if a bear took a shot at you with a rifle," said Dillon defensively.

Lang sat bolt upright with surprise. "If a what did which?" demanded the cook. "Seems I'm gettin' a little hard of hearin'. I thought you said a bear took a shot at you with a rifle."

"It did," declared Dillon, as he swung out of saddle. "That bullet would have killed me, too, if my horse hadn't stumbled just as the bear shot. Since I didn't have a six-gun with me, I went away from there in a hurry."

"Now, I've heard everythin' and believe none of it," growled old Lang.

"But I tell you it happened!" Dillon said. "It was a great big grizzly bear and it shot at me!"

"Oh, sure," drawled the cook in a disgusted tone. "And after you rode away, you looked back and saw the bear climb onto a horse and head off in the opposite direction, huh?"

SLATS DILLON stared at Beefy Lang, his eyes wide with amazement.

"How did you guess?" he said. "That's exactly what happened!"

"Un-huh," Lang nodded his big bald head solemnly. "So you rode back after the grizzly had gone and found he had left his ice skates behind him. That it, Slats?"

"No." There was a hurt expression on Dillon's usually smiling face. "I didn't ride back, and I didn't find any ice skates. What would a bear be doin' with skates in hot summer?"

"Here comes the Old Man down from the house." Lang glanced toward the big white ranchhouse that had been built on a knoll. "I want to hear what he says when you tell him a bear shot at you, and then rode off on horseback."

"Reckon he won't believe me either," Dillon said mournfully. "Never saw folks so anxious to doubt a man as the fellers on this spread."

Lem Carson walked on down to the bunkhouse—a tall, gray-haired man, who had been raising cattle for over thirty years. He halted and looked at Slats Dillon.

"Well?" he snapped.

Dillon blinked and tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. When the Old Man got to looking at you like that it was plumb scary. Beefy Lang was thoroughly enjoying himself. The big cook had a quaint sense of humor.

"A grizzly bear has been huntin' Slats," offered Lang. "With a rifle."

"That's right, Boss!" Dillon said nervously. "A big grizzly bear took a shot at me with a rifle while I was fixin' fence over on the south forty."

"And then the bear rode away on a horse," added Lang.

"Shut up, Beefy," snapped Lem

Carson. "One liar at a time is enough around here. Let Dillon finish tellin' it."

"That's all there is to tell," said Dillon, feeling right foolish. "After that happened I headed back here in a hurry."

The ranch owner stepped closer to Dillon and sniffed suspiciously. He frowned when he was unable to detect the odor of liquor on the little waddy's breath. Carson shook his head sadly.

"You ain't been drinkin', and I never figured you were loco, Slats," he said. "So why you would tell a windy like that is beyond me."

"It happened just like I say," protested Dillon. "I come back to get my gun and my rifle. Maybe if I get that bear somebody will believe me."

"Bring him in alive," said Lang, with a chuckle. "Maybe the bear will do some shootin' for us."

"If you don't come back with the bear before sundown you're fired, Dillon," Carson said coldly. "And I mean it."

Dillon just nodded. He went into the bunkhouse. He got down his gunbelt with the Colt in the holster, and buckled it on. Then he made sure his Winchester was fully loaded, and stuck a handful of extra cartridges for the rifle in a pocket of his levis.

To his relief the Old Man was walking back up to the ranchhouse, and Beefy Lang had gone into the cook shack. The way Dillon figured, he had had enough horrawing for one day.

"I'll show 'em," he muttered as he thrust the rifle into the saddle boot, and picked up his horse's reins. "I did see that bear."

He rode away, heading back to the south section of the Cross-in-a-Box range. The more he got thinking about it the less possible it seemed that a bear actually had taken a shot at him with a rifle, then mounted a horse and ridden away. Far as he knew he had never heard of a horse that would even let a bear come near, much less climb into saddle and ride it.

"That horse didn't act the least bit spooky either," Dillon decided. "Sure is funny. Reckon if somebody else told me what happened, I wouldn't believe it myself."

He had ridden for some distance when suddenly he blinked as he saw what appeared to be a gray figure standing at the side of a rock ahead of him. It seemed to be motioning him away from that section of the rangeland. Dillon rode closer with the reins in his left hand and his right hand on the butt of the gun in his holster.

Within a few yards of the gray object, he saw that it was merely a bush growing at the side of the boulder. He wondered if there could be something wrong with his eyesight that he had never noticed before.

When he reached the spot where he had seen the bear, he searched around, and found the tracks of the horse the bear had ridden. It had rained during the night, so the ground was still soft. He followed the tracks back toward the mountains that bordered the Cross-in-a-Box range to the south.

AS HE approached a section of the country where the trees and brush were thick, Dillon smelled smoke. He halted his horse and sat for a moment, thinking. Then he nodded and swung out of saddle. He led the cowpony over in the shade of some trees and ground-hitched the mount.

Drawing the rifle out of the saddle boot, he advanced into the brush on foot. He went cautiously trying to make as little noise as possible. The scent of burning wood grew stronger as he advanced.

Finally Dillon discovered that he was approaching a clearing. He saw a small branding fire burning in the clearing. A dogie was lying on its side not far away, its legs tied. A big black bearded man was heating a running iron in the fire. Dillon recognized the man. He was Hank Mawson, who

owned a small spread southeast of the big Cross-in-a-Box.

Dillon raised his rifle to his shoulder, and aimed it at Mawson as he stepped forward.

"Naughty, naughty," chided Dillon. "Folks in this part of the country don't like hombres who go around puttin' their own brands on mavericks, Mawson."

MAWSON cursed, and dropped the running iron as he whirled around. He grabbed for his gun, but changed his mind when he saw Dillon had him covered with the rifle.

"The Cross-in-a-Box hasn't started spring brandin' yet," Dillon said shortly. "Reckon if a man got busy he could add a lot of young stuff to his stock before he got around to checkin' up."

"Right chatty little jasper, ain't you?" said Mawson resignedly. "Never believe in sayin' in two words what you can in twenty."

"Get your horse," Dillon snapped. "I'm taking you to the ranch and turning you over to my boss. We'll leave the dogie right there as evidence."

"All right," Mawson said.

Dillon kept him covered with the rifle as the big, black bearded man got his horse and swung into the saddle. Then Dillon had the rancher ride over to where the little waddy had left his horse. Dillon followed on foot. He thrust the rifle into the saddle boot and swung into the saddle.

"Now I've got you!" Mawson roared, grabbing one of his guns out of the holster.

Dillon ducked as Mawson fired. The bullet knocked off his hat. "Don't try it again or I'll down you," Dillon said, covering Mawson with his six-gun. "I mean it."

"Drop that gun!" growled a gruff voice behind Dillon.

He glanced back over his shoulder —and caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a huge grizzly bear on horseback looming close behind him. Then something hard struck him a heavy blow on the head. Everything went black, and he slid out of the saddle unconscious.

Slats Dillon recovered his senses a long time afterward. His first impression was that there was a miniature corral inside his head—a corral that was filled with tiny wild horses all kicking and bucking.

He opened his eyes, but closed them again quickly, for a bright light was shining somewhere close to him. The little horses in the tiny corral calmed down. Dillon felt a little better.

He opened his eyes again and saw that the light came from an oil lamp on a table. Somewhere not far away he heard voices. He listened and heard two men talking.

"Having me dress up in that grizzly bear costume you wore in that masquerade back East has worked out mighty well so far," he heard a deep voice say. "But we're not goin' to get away with that for long, Mawson. Pretty soon more of the waddies around here will come huntin' that bear just like Dillon did."

"I doubt it," said Mawson's voice. "Who's goin' to believe that a bear is shootin' a rifle and ridin' a horse?"

"Dillon believed it enough to come back after I fired a shot at him," said the other man. "We didn't figure on him doin' that. Thought it would keep him away from the south end of the Cross-in-a-Box range long enough for us to gather up all the stock we wanted there."

"I'm glad you didn't kill Dillon when you hit him over the head," said Mawson. "Good thing I bought up a bunch of them masquerade costumes, too. Time we get through with Dillon and send him back to the Cross-in-a-Box, they'll think he's plumb crazy." The rustling ranch owner laughed. "And after they learn what happened to Dillon, the waddies around here

ain't goin' to admit they been seein' any bears and the like, Fell."

SLATS DILLON grinned to himself, then moaned like a man regaining consciousness. He knew by now that he was lying on a sofa in the living room of the Bar M ranchhouse. He no longer had a six-gun in his holster, and his rifle was missing.

He sat up with an expression of fear on his face as a skeleton appeared in the doorway and stood there staring at him.

"Welcome to the House of Death," said the skeleton in a deep voice—but it still sounded like Mawson's voice to Dillon. "A friend is waitin' to take you with him."

The skeleton stepped into the room and a red-faced Devil came through the doorway. Dillon uttered a wail of fear and leaped to his feet. He lunged toward the skeleton, his wiry body striking with such force that Mawson was knocked off his feet.

"Ghosts!" shouted Dillon. "Let me out of here!"

He hurled himself at the Devil's legs in a flying tackle, and the man he had heard called Fell went down hard. Dillon scrambled to his feet and dashed out of the room, racing back through the house. In the kitchen he found what he was looking for—the clothes the two men had removed when they had donned the masquerade costumes. Their gunbelts were lying on a table with guns still in the holsters.

Dillon grabbed up a couple of Colts and ran back, with the guns ready in his hands. He reached the living room just as Mawson and Fell got to their feet.

"All right, you playful sidewinders!" snapped Dillon. "Now I'll take over around here."

Just as it was getting dark that evening Slats Dillon rode into the Cross-in-a-Box. He was leading two horses by the reins. A skeleton was sitting in the saddle of one of the horses, and a red Devil was forking the other one.

Beefy Lang came out of the cook shack. He had heard the horses approaching. The big cook believed in ghosts—and what he saw was too much for him. He let out a yell that could have been heard for half a mile, then ran. When they found him later he had smashed one of the bunkhouse bunks by trying to wedge himself under it.

"I brought in a couple of rustlers, boss," informed Dillon when Lem Carson appeared to see what was going on. "One of them thought he was a bear—but he changed his mind about that."

MAWSON and Fell had their wrists tied behind their backs, and they looked mighty silly when Dillon pulled the masks off their heads so that their faces were visible. The little waddy had brought along the bear costume tied to the cantle of Mawson's saddle.

"I'd rather tangle with a real grizzly than that little hombre," muttered Mawson. "What that feller did to us before he tied us up and made us get on these horses was sure somethin'!"

"Keep still and let me talk," ordered Dillon.

He quickly told the Old Man the whole story.

Carson listened, and by the time Dillon had finished the ranch owner was chuckling.

"Craziest thing I ever heard," Carson exploded. "But you certainly did a good job, Slats. Reckon we'll just turn these two over to the Law, dressed like they are now. Takin' 'em into town like that will sure make 'em feel plumb foolish."

"I'm glad that wasn't a real bear," sighed Dillon. "You know, boss, for a time I thought there was somethin' wrong with my eyesight!"

ALL SIGNS FAIL

by BARRY SCOBEE

Jeff Leeland witches up a blackguard schemel

ALONG level cloud lay black against the sunset. It was the first cloud to appear in the Southwestern ranch-country sky in weeks.

"It looks like one of these here lead pencils," commented old Sam Hurley. "It's whittled down to a point on one end."

"Maybe it's a good sign," said young Jeff Leeland, falling in with the old man's whimsy. "Maybe it will do some writing on the sky about when it's going to rain."

"All signs fail in dry weather," Sam croaked the old saw and sighed. "Anyhow, it's got a fat rubber eraser on t'other end to rub out any writin'."

"It's got to rain," said Jeff, sudden desperation in his tone. "Got to!"

"'Taint got to do nothin', son," Sam contradicted contrarily. "Only it had better, or my hands will drop clean off."

He regarded his gnarled fingers resting

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along the top rail of the corral gate.

Jeff inspected his hands, too. They were stiff and cracked, with deep dry sores made by wind and wet while he had been drawing water for weeks with a rope and bucket for his little herd of cattle. Today the level of the water in the well had gone down and down and not risen again from the underground flow. If the same thing happened tomorrow, the cattle would get no water.

"Let's quit thinking about it, Sam," said Jeff. "Let's go in and get some supper."

"I'd as lief not eat as strike a fire and lay out supper," Sam said wearily. "My back's a-achin' from the South Pole to the North. Arms is like sticks. Knee joints—"

"Cold biscuits left from breakfast, and a pot of beans," said Jeff. "I'll stoop and kindle the stove if you'll slice some salt belly."

"Don't know if I can grip the butcher knife—hey, looky! Company comin'. Bad sign. If they ain't had supper, I'll shoot 'em."

Two horsemen riding over a nearby hill were dark shapes against the sunset.

JEFF and Sam rested their arms back on the gate and waited, drooping.

"Howdy," one of the strangers spoke out presently. "How are you fixed for water?"

"Ain't fixed," said Sam. "Ain't got none."

"You're sure drawin' aces then," the man declared. "Because I'm a water witch."

"Don't know about the water," said Sam caustically, "but you sure look like a witch."

"Sam!" protested Jeff. "Remember your hospitality." And to the newcomers, "You gents are riding late."

" 'Taint never late 'less it's too late to eat," said the talking stranger. "Name's Moses. I'm called by friends and enemies 'Water Witch' Moses."

He stepped down from his saddle.

"Might as well stay straddle of your broomstick, witch," old Sam said. "I don't believe in signs and water witchin' and so forth. I was a well-driller till I got religion and repented. Drilled three hundred holes. Witched every durn one of 'em myself. Half of 'em had water and half was as dry as our cows is goin' to be tomorrow. It took my faith."

"Maybe you ain't no college-edjucated witcher," Water Witch Moses allowed. "Maybe you don't do it scientific."

He fumbled in the big tarp-covered roll on the pack horse, and drew out a copper-bright rod that was bent into a V-shape.

"Never did fancy those metal doodlebugs," said Sam. "Me, I perfer fresh-cut stock with sap in the wood. Closer to nature."

"You the owner here?" Moses asked coldly.

"Who? Me?"

"I ain't lookin' at the other feller."

"Nope, I ain't the owner," Sam said. "Jeff is the owner. Me, I ain't nothing but the cook, dishwasher, bed-maker, and wood-getter. Rest of the time I just rest a-drawin' water."

"Heh-heh, good for you!" Moses addressed Jeff. "I'll witch you a well and guarantee water for a hundred smackers."

"If I had a hundred dollars I'd retire," said Jeff. "Why piddle along at a hundred bucks a well, mister? If you can guarantee water, any ranchman in the country will pay you five hundred or a thousand."

"Bull-'s-eye, first crack, young feller. But I don't hold up my clients. I've witched sixty wells in the last three months and got good water every time, and charged a hundred smackers. No more. I ain't greedy and grabbin'. You done et supper? Feed us and you can take the price of the grub from the hundred."

Old Sam Hurley helped with the supper, glumly. Now and then, he and Water Witch Moses indulged in a verbal passage-at-arms, like two dogs that can't get along. The other stranger, a dour man with a drooping mustache, spoke only once

throughout the evening. That was when Jeff asked him if he required any more beans.

"Don't mind if I do," he said rustily.

They went wearily to bed as soon as the dishes were washed. The strangers settled down under a shed with their own bedrolls. Moses kept up his water talk until the last minute. Jeff lay down in the warm August night wrapped mostly in a hope that maybe—just maybe—there was something to the man's bragging that he had never failed to find water. A fool's hope! Jeff's thoughts hazed out on that hopeful-hopeless note.

After the first two or three hours of deepest sleep, he was wakeful. The crusty sores in the wrinkles of his hands ached like bruises. He heard old Sam tossing and muttering from his aches, too. Then, in the night, Jeff thought he heard the door between the bedroom and the living room gently close. He listened, all ears. Old Sam tossed and groaned and murmured something about all signs failing. Then Jeff could see a dim light around the cracks of the door.

He eased off the bed, too stiff and sore not to be awkward and make small noises. But a husking little breeze in and around the house covered his sounds. Rather than try turning the knob with his stiff fingers, he squatted and peered through the keyhole.

IN THE living room the kerosene table lamp was on the floor, with a scrap of paper thrust against the chimney to dim the light toward the door. Water Witch Moses was kneeling by the lamp and Jeff's small trunk, which was open.

Moses rummaged inside the trunk and brought out Jeff's wallet. It contained only news clippings about ranchmen being on the watch for confidence men and about two or three crimes that had occurred in the country. Moses tossed it back with disgust.

Next, he dragged out Jeff's bundle of private papers—a few old letters and receipts, canceled checks, and the deed to the little ranch, with mortgage to secure the remainder of the payments.

These two papers Moses read through avidly, apparently getting their contents quickly. With a nod of satisfaction, he replaced them, put down the trunk lid soundlessly, and took up the lamp. In a moment the room was dark. Moses' heavy weight made the porch creak faintly as he left.

Jeff tiptoed to his open window. From it he made out, by sound more than sight in the dark night, Moses going to the shed.

Jeff spraddled through the window. He was barefoot. But the ground was hard-packed and free of sandburs. He slipped toward the shed.

At once he heard Moses saddling a horse. In no time the man was riding off into the black night.

Jeff knew that by the time he could get on his pants and boots, and saddle up, the mysterious stranger would be lost in the darkness.

Jeff found where the two visitors had put down their beds. The one with the mustache was there in snoring sleep.

Jeff returned to his bed, puzzled, trying to make head or tail out of the queer proceedings. He was sore as a kicked wolf, too, at having his private papers investigated. But, perversely now, sleep grabbed him.

The next he knew, dawn was flowing over the landscape like water. Water! The thought brought him back to his problem with a jerk.

Jeff went first to the corral for a look at Water Witch's horse, to see if he could make out anything about the ride in the night. But not his horse nor any of the others showed sign of saddle-blanket sweat to indicate a ride far or fast.

Back at the shed, Moses was just crawling out.

"Get plenty of shut-eye last night?" Jeff asked.

"Didn't open an eye from the time I hit the tarp till right now," said Moses. "How about you, George?"

The other man grunted.

Old Sam Hurley came from the house.

He gave Moses a glare. Jeff edged between them.

"Listen, Mr. Leeland," Water Witch Moses said to Jeff, "how about me witching a well for you and takin' six of your steers for pay? I got a soft spot for young fellers like you. You say you've got no money. My heart goes out in sympathy. And you sure are goin' to need a well mighty soon, the way them cattle is bawlin' thirsty down at your well yonder."

"Look at 'em, Jeff," said Sam. "Around the well already. Shows they didn't get a full sip yesterday. You cook up breakfast, Jeff. I'll go down and start drawin' water for 'em."

Sam went striding off, the well being no more than a quarter of a mile from the house.

"He's kind of bossy, ain't he?" said Moses. "Telling you what to do."

"We get along," said Jeff. "If you witched me a well, it might be a month or two before I could get a driller here."

"Four or five in the county. You could git one. I don't git no pay till he strikes plenty water. Six steers, picked by me, ain't too much, seein' I'd guarantee water."

JEFF'S hopes bloomed again. What if this windy witch did strike water for him? It might turn out to be pretty important.

"I'll give you four steers to get me a plumb wet well," said Jeff.

"Five."

"Four."

"It's a bet, seein' it's you. Easy way to git four steers, too. Because I never fail. In sixty witchings I ain't failed once. You same as got a rich well right now. I sure like my hot coffee early."

Throughout the preparation of breakfast, and the eating and drinking of it, Moses kept up his glib talk about never failing. Jeff's hopes went up and down. And he began to wonder a little, too, at the boastful self-confidence.

Moses and the silent George left the house on horseback. Moses and his copper "doodlebug," as Sam had called it.

"I never unlimber this divining rod," he said, "until I git to the most onlikely places. Up on hills or in mean rocks where most well-drillin' witches never go."

The pair was hardly out of sight when Sam Hurley got back, looking gloomier than Jeff had ever seen him. And excited too.

"Jeff, the well's almost dry. Water's running in a little bit. I ain't been able to jiggle up a whole pail."

Jeff stared at the haggard, loyal face. Jeff's own features went gray under the tan.

All he said was, "Get your breakfast."

He started down the slope.

Sam called after him, "Quart of coffee is all I'll need."

Before Jeff reached the well, the old man was on his heels. The well was only a roughly blasted hole in the rocks, twelve feet deep. Ordinarily, it stood two-thirds full. Had it been that way now, it would have given the cattle a meager drink, with what might flow in underground during the day. But all that Jeff could see was a spot of brightness little larger than the draw bucket, with only a small glistening trickle flowing in.

"What's happened here anyhow?" he demanded, getting up.

"You reckon them two fellers done something to the well?" Sam questioned in a huge suspicion. "Jiggered the flow someways? They couldn't have drawed it empty."

"What are those cows bunched down there for?" Jeff asked, pointing at several old high horns sniffing and bawling down in a ditch below them.

Both men went clambering down the rocky slope. The cows gave back. Where they had been, was hoof-marked wet ground. The men followed the moisture for fifty yards.

"Been water runnin' here," said Sam. "Now how'n Sam Hill did it get here?"

They might have missed the explanation had not Sam's sharp old trail eye fallen upon a bootprint in the soft earth

near the top of the bank, where no human track should have been. Pointing to it, then pushing aside bunch grass and weeds, he found something that made both him and Jeff gape in astonishment.

The something was a big neat coil of rubber hose, strong inch-and-a-quarter tubing, such as might be found around a well-drilling outfit.

"They syphoned our well out," Sam managed to choke. "That durn dirty—whoever done it?"

Jeff told him about Moses rummaging through the trunk and riding away in the darkness, and lying when he said he had slept all night.

"They drained our well!" Sam cried. "They've put us on the rocks. Every cow animal we've got will perish of mad, bawlin' thirst. Git my hands on that—"

"Where did he get the hose?" Jeff cut in.

They went back up to the well on slightly higher ground. They scanned over all the visible country. No well-drilling outfit, no riders, no unusual thing was to be seen anywhere. They climbed higher. After a time they made out Moses and George two miles or so away, atop the rockiest hill on the ranch.

"Witching there for water!" Sam jeered. "Showin' off. I doubt he can witch anyhow with that durn copper contraption."

AS they made their way back down to the well, Jeff's thoughts were reaching out in every direction. What were the two men up to, anyhow? Was Moses really trying to find water?

"Can men really locate underground water with a forked stick, or what they call a doodlebug?" he asked Sam.

"You losin' your wits, Jeff?" Sam growled, as if outraged. "You heard me say last night I'd drilled three hundred wells by witchin'. Think I was lyin'?"

"How?"

"Don't ask me no hows. I don't know. Don't nobody know. We just know the stick twists down when you git over water. Didn't you never see it?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Reckon I didn't," Jeff admitted.

The old man went off a few steps to a clump of Mexican buckeye and cut out a forked stick. Trimming it neatly he held the prongs, one in each hand, and pointed the main stem away from him.

"That's the way you hold it," he said. "Take it. Clutch the prongs tight. That's it. Now walk over to the well."

Feeling a little foolish, but holding the divining rod steadily in front of him, Jeff walked to the well. As he came abreast, the whole forked stick twitched and bent downward.

"I think I caused it to do that with my gripped hands," said Jeff.

"Huh," Sam scoffed.

Jeff went down into the ditch to the moist ground. "Don't know if it'll work there," Sam called.

But again Jeff seemed to feel a twitching in the fork, yet not so pronounced. He tried it again at the well. Still he was not certain that the tugging on the stick was not caused by his tense gripping. He tossed the fork aside.

"We've got to draw what water we can for these cattle," he said.

It was a dreary, hopeless task, dipping up the accumulated water. The day was growing hot. The thirsty animals bawled and crowded at the trough. The pair carried water out to poorer, less combative cows, one taking the bucket, the other keeping the shoving beasts from trampling him.

They kept watching the higher country for Water Witch Moses and the other man, catching a glimse of them only now and then. Jeff's thoughts kept tugging at the situation.

"Sam," he said while they waited for the bucket to fill, "I've been here four years. You've been around these parts twenty years."

"Thirty," said Sam.

"Who owned this ranch before I did?"

"Nobody but that big corporation. They leased out their holdings in small dabs of ten, fifteen, and twenty square-mile patches. Even leased fifty sections to some. A feller, I don't know his name, had this twelve sections of yours."

"Wasn't anybody living here when I came to look at the place," said Jeff. "They told me at the corporation's office that nobody was on it or trying to buy it. So I made my down payment."

"Yup. That snickerbill who owns the BL outfit, when I was drilling a well for him, told me the feller leasin' here wanted to buy, but he didn't have the money for the down payment. He was tryin' to git the price down or something."

"Maybe this Moses or George was the leaseholder and is back now pulling some shenanigan.

"Yeh. Maybe not. Who knows? The durn treacherous whelps! I'm surprised a water witch would be up to sich stuff."

"Sam," Jeff got back to a question that had been at the back of his mind, "if water can be witched with sticks and rods, why are wells so hard to get?"

"Hah, that's the joker in the deck. Ain't no question about a divinin' rod dippin' down to water. But they ain't got no jedgment. They'll dip for a gushin' underground river just as easy as they do for a little moisture. I've had strong indications and drilled way down and hit nothing but a little wet earth."

TOWARD noon, discouraged after seeing ahead of them nothing but stark ruin, Jeff and Sam left the bawling cattle and walked back to the house. As they arrived, Water Witch Moses and the man George came in on their horses. It struck Jeff that the pair had been waiting just out of sight.

Water Witch Moses came up, shaking his head dolefully from side to side.

"I've covered every dang foot of the most onlikely and also the likely parts of yer ranch," he said mournfully. "First time I ever failed to git a indication. My reputation is hurt. And my feelin's." He sighed. "Well, they say all signs fail in dry weather. Looks like my scientific college divining rod has failed. Reckon all there is left to do is eat dinner."

"Put up your horses," said Jeff.

"Hey," said Sam, as soon as the men

were out of hearing. "I recognize all to once that dad-blasted tight-mouth George feller. He's a notary public over to the courthouse in Shindig. I'll bet my hoss he ain't up to no good."

Jeff was starting a fire in the cookstove when Water Witch Moses appeared.

"You've got some more company comin'," he said. "I sure hope he ain't too hearty a grub-grabber, seein' you're kind of short on vittles."

The lone man riding up was a big, whiskered individual in range hat, boots, and town clothes.

"My name's Tom Ledley," he said, and shook hands all around. "There are numerous smaller ranchmen up against it in this extended drouth. I have a downright horror of seeing hard-working men go broke. Been broke twice myself, and it isn't agreeable. I've been buying up a few small ranches to help out in this calamitous drouth. It's all I can do to pay for my ticket in this hard world. How you fixed for water, Mr. Hurley?"

"I have enough for dinner coffee here in the house well," said Jeff, trying to be lightly humorous, but showing dismay.

"Ah," breathed the whiskered visitor. "I sense that you are in desperate circumstances, indeed. Are you in a position to drill for water at once?"

"Wouldn't know where to drill."

"Have you had your land witched?"

Jeff nodded to Moses. "He's been busy this forenoon."

"Me, I'm Water Witch Moses," the diviner spoke up. "I've given his ranch a good goin' over with my scientific divining rod. Didn't git a single nibble."

"Ah, so you are the famous water witch who never fails!" exclaimed Tom Ledley. "Moses *always* finds water! But now you've failed! Don't be discouraged, my dear sir. All signs fail now and then." Ledley turned to Jeff. "Your situation is indeed gloomy.

"I bought two ranches within distance from here, where cattle could be moved in time. Have you thought of selling out to save what you can?"

[*Turn page*]

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"I'll have to think about it," Jeff said doubtfully.

"I would be willing to pay you about what you have invested. Of course, there would be some loss of cattle. If the celebrated Water Witch Moses has failed to divine an underground stream, it means there isn't any. Further, it means this would always be a wet-season ranch, practically useless in protracted drouths. I don't wish to hurry you, Jeff. I never push a man. Take your time through the dinner hour to consider what your best interests are. I recognize that gentleman over there as George Leadmyer, the notary public at Shindig. No doubt he could notarize any papers that might have to be signed."

"Sam," said Jeff, "if you'll start dinner, I'll go look after Mr. Ledley's horse."

JEFF put out some of his scarce grain for the visitor's animal. Then he saddled one of his own horses out of sight behind the shed.

Still keeping out of sight, he rode swiftly down to the well where his herd stood in the burning August sun, bawling for water. There, he reached down from the saddle and picked up the forked stick he had tossed away.

Across the pleasantly rolling hills and then up to higher, rocky ground, Jeff hurried his bay. His thoughts were not pleasant. They dwelt upon his guests in general, but mostly upon the unctuous gabble of the ranch buyer.

"Must be that I look like a dunce," Jeff commented. "Thinking he could fool me with oily talk. Water Witch Moses! Dug into my papers and found out how much I paid and how much I owe on this ranch. Brought a notary along. Failed to witch water! Had the deck stacked for his lawyer to show up when they figured I'd be discouraged and sunk. Buy me out, will they, at a reasonable price!"

Well, maybe they would at that, he thought further. Moses might know there

was water on the land somewhere.

"Probably he's the man that had it leased and wanted to buy and couldn't. But I've got to find that water or lose my cattle and go broke, or sell out."

He topped out on the highest ground and the rockiest patch, where he had seen Moses and the other man wandering.

There he began to walk about with the forked stick gripped tightly in front of him. Back and forth, here and there. He got no response at all. He felt silly.

Jeff went down the slope a short way to the very roughest spot. Because he could see the whole area of barren rock from horseback, he had never taken time to get down and walk into it.

Once more he gripped the two branches of the fork and pointed the stem ahead. And suddenly it seemed to twist and tug.

He gave back, startled. Surely his own gripping hands had not caused that movement. He tried it again. At the same spot, he did, for a fact, feel the fork jerk. He took another step forward. The green wood fairly yanked downward, as if pulled by a mighty attraction. He took another step, and one of the fork's branches snapped in two in his hand.

Jeff stood there dumbfounded. He scanned his eyes around, far and near. Then his ears caught the sound of running water.

Good Lord, was he going daffy? Was he hearing water when there was no water to hear? No, by gracious! There *was* a sound of water!

He dropped the broken stick and got down and put an ear to the burning hot earth. Running water, no doubt of it!

He raised up and looked at the rocks. Just before him was a flat stone of the size of a washtub, roughly two or three inches thick. It looked as if it might have been laid there. He hooked his fingers under the edge of the slab and heaved.

The rock came up and dropped aside. At Jeff's feet was a hole big enough for a man to drop into. He knelt, peered down, and listened. Gradually in the sunlit rocky depths, eight or ten feet below,

[*Turn page*]

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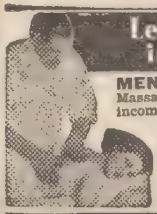
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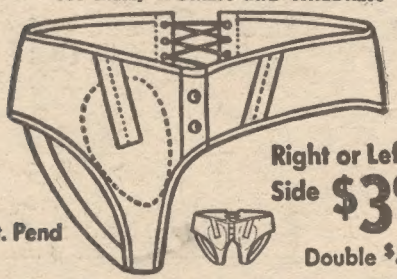

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RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

he saw a rushing stream of water.

"It will increase the value of my land three or four times over," Jeff mused. "And give those poor thirsting beasts down there a drink!"

WHEN Jeff rode up to his ranchhouse, the lawyer—if he was a lawyer—and Water Witch Moses and the notary public were waiting for him outside the door.

Jeff could hear old Sam in the kitchen.

"Well, well," said Ledley, "we didn't know what had become of you. But I waited, hoping to see you through."

"I found the water," said Jeff.

There was utter silence for a moment. Then Moses exploded.

"You found the water! Why, you dirty, double-crossin', trick-playin', spyin' four-legged—you followed me. You saw me!"

There was a step at the kitchen door. Old Sam Hurley appeared with a double-barrel shotgun in his hands.

"Loaded with buckshot," Sam said.

Tom Ledley cleared his throat. "Moses, as your attorney at law," he said, "my advice is to retire gracefully. Even to get out of the country, and get fast. You will recall that I told you that this was a very tricky game to attempt. Fortunately, you paid me in advance. Let's express our thanks for hospitality and depart."

"Yep, quick," said old Sam.

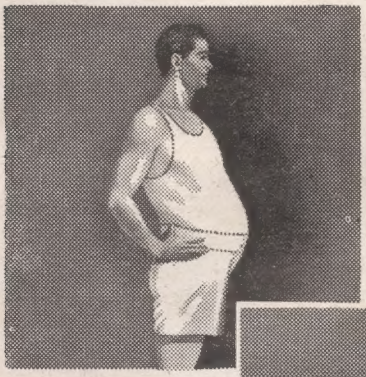
"You needn't pay for the hospitality," said Jeff. "I'll just keep that nice long hose and syphon water out of the new find for my cattle this afternoon."

"Mr. Jeff," said the lawyer, "I hope I am not such a complete scoundrel as to depart without informing you that three or four miles below here is a well-driller with his outfit. I spent the night with him. It was my client's idea. He wanted to get a well started as soon as you signed the deed. I have no doubt you can employ the said driller without delay, if so be your inclination."

"Git goin'!" old Sam ordered. "We got to git our cattle to water."

"Right," said Jeff. "Before any more signs and witches fail."

MEN! Meet MR. AMERICA



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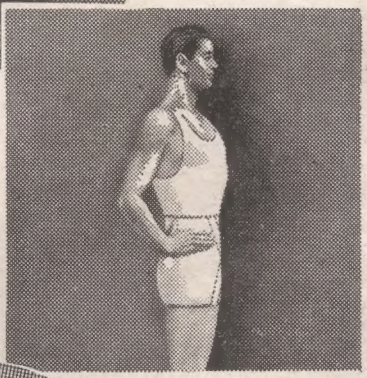

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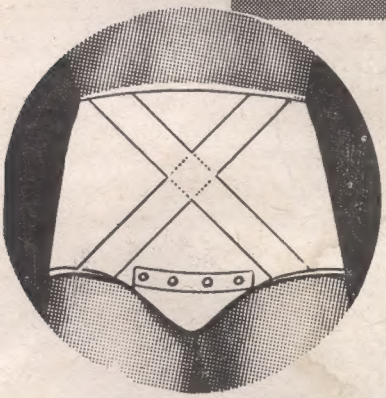

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